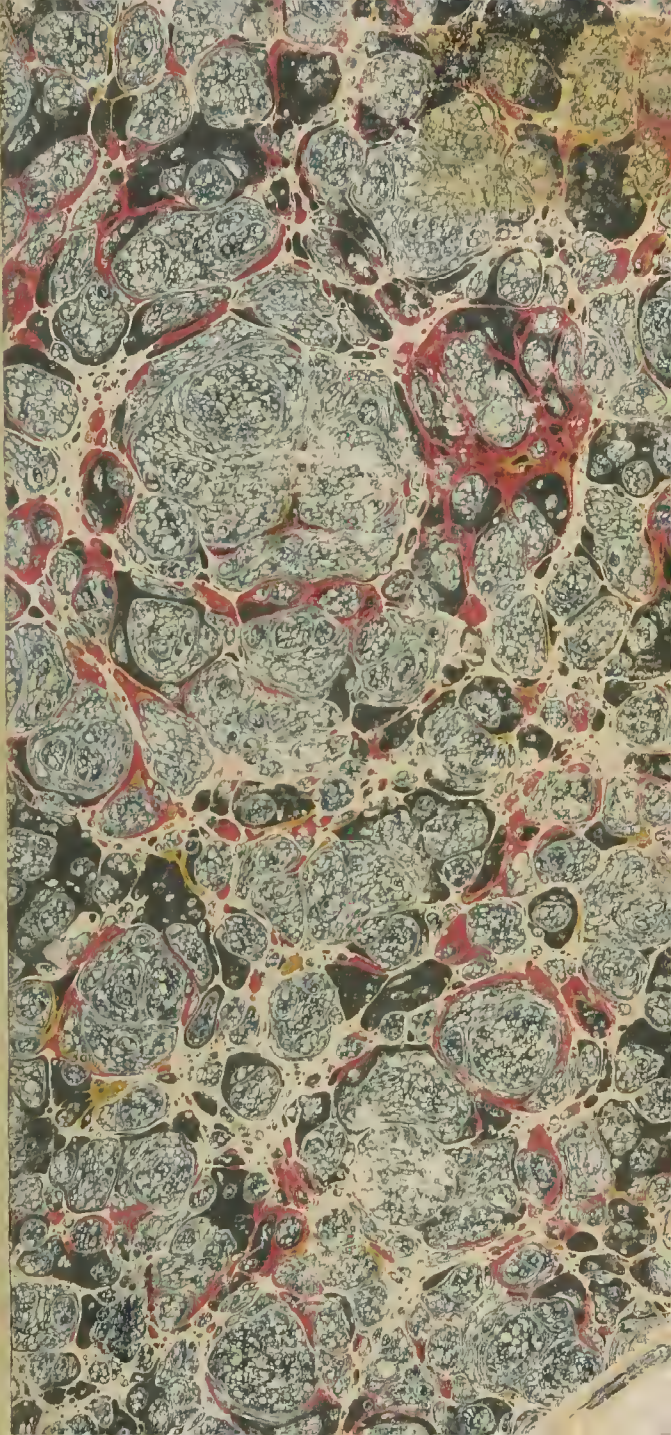


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THE FLESHLY SCHOOL OF POETRY

AND OTHER PHENOMENA OF THE DAY

BY ROBERT BUCHANAN

PHIBB.—What pretty flowers are these?
I pray thee let me smell!

CLOWN. Smell, an thou wilt!
Elies: be not flowers for maids. This snow-white thing,
Wood-garlic, doth infect the sylvan air,
And sicken the sweet milk of browsing kine;
The other, purple houndstongue, worse than mice
For smelling cleanly chambers: here, again,
A flower less comely, stinking goosefoot, grows,—
An odour dear to dogs!

PHIBB. Faugh! O how foul!
How namic ye this, the tallest and most fair?
CLOWN. Death-nettle, lady. Touch it not!

PHIBB. I am sick—
I swoon—its fetid breathing fills the air,
Like the most rank corruption of a corse.

A WHIP FOR WHITE WANTONS, 1651.

THE FLESHLY SCHOOL OF POETRY

AND OTHER PHENOMENA OF THE DAY

Williams
BY ROBERT BUCHANAN

“For shame!—write cleanly, Laheo, or write none.”

HALL's *Satires*, Book II. 1.

“Belial came last, than whom a spirit more lewd
Fell not from heaven, or more gross to love
Vice for itself.”

Paradise Lost.

STRAHAN & CO.
56, LUDGATE HILL, LONDON
1872

A. 145820

LONDON:

PRINTED BY VIRTUE AND CO.,
CITY ROAD.

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with flattery to bear criticism, and too querulous and humorsome to perceive the real issues of the case.

My imputed crime is as follows: that I did not sign my own name to the article, and that I spoke in high terms of my own poems.

The first account has been disposed of by the simple statement that I did not sign the article at all. If it be retorted that the rule of the *Contemporary Review* is never to admit pseudonyms or unsigned articles, I answer that at least three of the regular contributors to that *Review* have habitually used pseudonyms, and that, in an early number of the same publication, Dean Mansell sharply criticized Mr. Mill in an unsigned article in which he spoke of himself in the third person, afterwards reprinting the article, with his own name, as "The Philosophy of the Conditioned."

The second count, which charges me with secret self-praise, is so absurd an attempt to distract judgment that it is almost unworthy of mention. In an opening paragraph (now suppressed for its weakness) I drew out a sort of sketch of *Hamlet* as "cast" by the contemporary poets, Mr. Tennyson of course assuming the leading character; and among the list of smaller parts I humorously spoke of myself as playing the part of—what? Horatio? The King? Polonius? Rosencranz? Guildenstern? Osric? Of none of these, small or great, but simply that of "Cornelius!" I imagined then that I was writing for readers who had read their Shakspeare, or who had at any rate seen his great tragedy murdered on the stage, and never dreamt I should have to explain (as I am now forced to explain) that "Cornelius" is one of those two gentlemen who appear in Scene II. in the usual way of what are technically known

as "utility" people, and after uttering together this one memorable line—

"In this and all things will we show our duty!"—

exeunt in all humility. In a subsequent scene they return, and Voltimand, the *other* gentleman, makes a speech, while "Cornelius" stands in the usual "utility" attitude, with one leg bent and one hand laid gracefully on his hips. This is the proud character I am accused of arrogating to myself in the grand list of contemporary performances! Surely, if I had been ambitious of obtruding my own merits, I might at least have gone in for Fortinbras or the First Gravedigger!

The other allusion to "my own poems" will be found on page 46 of this pamphlet. It simply chronicles a fact, and is neither complimentary nor the reverse.

The truth is, all this hubbub about the authorship is a vulgar farce, got up to distract public attention. My article was altered and my name suppressed with the best of all motives—that of letting the charges contained in it stand on their own merits, and that of saving me from the persecution of a clique of literary Mohawks; but it is a pity any alteration was made at all.

Be that as it may, let me entreat my readers not to let their attention be distracted by any consideration of me personally. Let them carefully accept and weigh the evidence brought forward in these pages, and judge the case on its own merits. The clatter that is being made about the authorship is only meant to excite the public against a patient examination of this "most damning" indictment against the Fleshly School of Poetry.

The most curious part of the whole affair remains to be

told. It is delightful as showing the ratio of public intelligence. It appears that these poems of Mr. Rossetti have actually become favourites with that prude of prudes, the British matron; and several gentlemen tell me that their aunts and grandmothers see no harm in them! My own grandmother is not poetical, so I have not sought her opinion. But here I am front to front with the amazing fact that a large section of cultured people read poetry, and enjoy it, without the faintest perception of what it is all about—without the slightest wish to realise the images or the situations—without any more intellectual effort than they use when having their hair brushed! Conceive the mental state of the aunt or grandmother who could read such verses as this—

“I was a child beneath her touch—a man
 When *breast to breast we clung*, even I and she,
 A spirit when her spirit looked thro’ me,—
 A god when *all our life-breath met to fan*
Our life’s-blood, till love’s emulous ardours ran,
Fire within fire, desire in deity!”—

and merely think them sweetly pretty. It is hard to think ill of one’s relations; but the mature females in question must be either very obtuse, or—very, very naughty!

The truth appears to be, that writing, however nasty, will be perfectly sanctified to English readers if it be moral in the legal sense; and thus a poet who describes sensual details may do so with impunity if he labels his poems—“Take notice! These sensations are strictly *nuptial*; these delights have been sanctioned by English law, and registered at Doctors’ Commons!” We have here the reason that Mr. Rossetti has almost escaped censure, while Mr. Swinburne has been punished so severely; for Mr. Rossetti, in

his worst poems, explains that he is speaking dramatically in the character of a *husband* addressing his *wife*. Animalism is animalism, nevertheless, whether licensed or not ; and, indeed, one might tolerate the language of lust more readily on the lips of a lover addressing a mistress than on the lips of a husband virtually (in these so-called "Nuptial" Sonnets) wheeling his nuptial couch out into the public streets.

ROBERT BUCHANAN.

I.

“Shakspere’s an infernal humbug, Pip! I never read him. What the devil is it all about, Pip? There’s a lot of feet in Shakspere’s verse, but there ain’t any legs worth mentioning in Shakspere’s plays, are there, Pip? Let us have plenty of leg pieces, Pip, and I’ll stand by you!”—DICKENS’S *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

THOUGH this is a generation of great poets and teachers ; though Tennyson, Browning, Victor Hugo, Carlyle, Emerson, and Walt Whitman are still amongst us, while Dickens (essentially a poet) and Landor have not long left us ; though much of our public teaching (and notably that of the public press) is lofty and clean, there are not wanting signs that Sensualism, which from time immemorial has been the cancer of all society, is shooting its ulcerous roots deeper and deeper, and blotching more and more the fair surface of things. Coming this winter from a remote retreat in the Highlands to this great centre of life which men have named London, moving from street to street and from house to house, seeing all that a man with eyes can see, what are the objects which most impress themselves upon me? Not the old immemorial squalor of the slums, the hideous famine of the by-streets and lanes, the gaudy misery in numberless human faces (that is no novelty) ; nor the fatuous imbecility and superficiality of the moneyed vulgar, and the shapeless

ugliness of women who feed high and take no exercise (that, too, is familiar, though not perhaps on so large a scale); nor the dark blotches of life where disease squats for ever, nor the follies of the last new fashion, nor the hideousness of the last new public building. All these things are passed on one side, as I approach a phenomenon so strange and striking that to a superstitious mind it might seem a portent, and so hideous that it converts this great city of civilisation into a great Sodom or Gomorrah waiting for doom. Look which way I will, the horrid thing threatens and paralyzes me. It lies on the drawing-room table, shamelessly naked and dangerously fair. It is part of the pretty poem which the belle of the season reads, and it breathes away the pureness of her soul like the poisoned breath of the girl in Hawthorne's tale. It covers the shelves of the great Oxford-Street librarian, lurking in the covers of three-volume novels. It is on the French booksellers' counters, authenticated by the signature of the author of the "Visite de Noces." It is here, there, and everywhere, in art, literature, life, just as surely as it is in the "Fleurs de Mal," the Marquis de Sade's "Justine," or the "Monk" of Lewis. It appeals to all tastes, to all dispositions, to all ages. If the querulous man of letters has his "Baudelaire," the pimpled clerk has his *Day's Doings*,* and the dissipated artisan his

* Publications of this sort are at last being taken seriously in hand by the Society for the Suppression of Vice. As I write, the following appears in the weekly journals:—"THE 'DAY'S DOINGS' AGAIN.—At Bow-street police-court on Thursday, Frederick Shove, the publisher of the *Day's Doings*, an illustrated paper, appeared to a fresh summons, granted by Sir Thomas Henry, charged with publishing indecent prints and printed matter. Mr. Besley (instructed by Mr. Collette, of the Society for the Suppression of Vice) prosecuted; Mr. Laxton, as before,

Day and Night. The streets are full of it. Photographs of nude, indecent, and hideous harlots, in every possible attitude that vice can devise, flaunt from the shop-windows, gloated over by the fatuous glint of the libertine and the greedy open-mouthed stare of the day-labourer. Never was this Snake, which not all the naturalists of the world have been able to scotch, so vital and poisonous as now. It has penetrated into the very sweetshops; and there, among the commoner sorts of confectionery, may be seen this year models of the female Leg, the whole definite and elegant article as far as the thigh, with a fringe of paper cut in imitation of the female drawers and embroidered in the female fashion !

When things have come to such a pass as this, it is difficult to be quite serious in dealing with them. The foot-and-mouth disease is dreadful, but the Leg-disease, though generally fatal, is egregiously absurd into the bargain. Now, to begin with, there is nothing indecent in the human Leg itself; on the contrary, it is a most beautiful and useful member. Nor is it necessarily indecent to show the

defended. Mr. Besley said that a promise was made when the defendant was last summoned at this court that all matter or prints suggestive of indecency should be withdrawn for the future. He produced five copies of the *Day's Doings*, from which he read different articles of an obscene and vulgar nature, and pointed out a print of a nude woman, which was, in his opinion, even more objectionable. Mr. Laxton contended that the nude figure referred to was a copy of the work of a well-known artist, and to decrease its nudity drapery had been added to the figure. Sir Thomas Henry said the drapery was suggestive of even greater indecency. Sir Thomas Henry decided upon committing the case for trial, but said he would accept bail for the appearance of the defendant at the sessions, two sureties in £80 each, and the defendant's recognizances in £150."

Leg, as some ladies do upon the stage, without in the least shocking our propriety. But the Leg, an excellent thing in itself, becomes insufferable if obtruded into every concern of life, so that instead of humanity we see a demon resembling the Manx coat-of-arms, cutting capers without a body or a head. The Leg, as a disease, is subtle, secret, diabolical. It relies not merely on its own intrinsic attractions, but on its atrocious suggestions. It becomes a spectre, a portent, a mania. Turn your eyes to the English stage. Shakspeare is demolished and lies buried under hecatombs of Leg! Open the last new poem. Its title will possibly be this, or similar to this—"Leg is enough." Walk along the streets. The shop-windows teem with Leg. Enter a music-hall—Leg again, and (O tempora! O mores!) the Can-Can. Jack enjoys it down Wapping way just as Jones does in the Canterbury Hall. It is only in fashionable rooms and in the stalls of the theatre that Leg is at a discount; but that is not because life there is more innocent and modest, but because Leg is in the higher circles altogether eclipsed by its two most formidable rivals—Bosom and Back.

If popular writers are to be credited, there is running rampant in English society a certain atrocious form of vice, a monster with two heads—one of which is called Adultery, the other Dipsomania—and these two heads, blind to all else in the world, leer and ogle at each other. I have not sufficient knowledge of English polite society to say whether or not the terrible impeachment is based on a careful study of facts; but I do know that the writings in which these facts have been chronicled, the prurient pictures given of vice masking in the garb of virtue, become in their turn, and

for the very sake of the imputations they contain, the delight of vulgar *débauchés* and heartless libertines. No form of animal is more common than he who, when charged with folly and immorality, retorts with a smile—"All very well, but I am no worse than my neighbours; virtue—fudge! there is no such thing, at least in English society; everything is bought and sold;"—and this enlightened person, hearing on the best authority that love of the best sort procurable and lust of the gaudiest sort possible are equally in the market for the highest bidder, prefers purchasing his indulgence as the humour seizes him to making a bargain for a life-luxury of which he may get thoroughly tired. Nothing, meantime, gratifies the free lover more than to be told that marriage is a farce and continence a sham, that all forms of life are equally heartless, and that his betters in the social scale only commit in secret the follies in which he indulges openly. Is it true, then, that English society is honeycombed and rotten? More than one form of literature says so. The smart journal says so. So does the novel of the period. So does the artistic Bohemian. For my own part I am inclined to believe (though, as I have said, on very insufficient knowledge) that true English life is infinitely purer and better than our smart writers and lady novelists imagine it to be; that the pure rose of English maidenhood still blows as brightly as ever; that, in a word, the canker lies on the surface and has not *yet* eaten down into the body social. How then account for the portentous symptoms which are everywhere appalling us? Thus. [There is on the fringe of real English society, and chiefly, if not altogether, in London here, a sort of *demi-monde*, not composed, like that other in France, of simple courtesans, but

of men and women of indolent habits and æsthetic tastes, artists, literary persons, novel writers, actors, men of genius and men of talent, butterflies and gadflies of the human kind, leading a lazy existence from hand to mouth. These persons "write for the papers." They publish books, often at their own expense. They, some of them, have titles. They belong to clubs and they go to dinner parties. They paint pictures, sometimes good ones. They compose music, generally bad music. They lecture on art and literature to young ladies' schools. They read Balzac, Dumas *fiils*, and the "cerebellic" autobiographies of Goethe. They are clever, refined, interesting, able, querulous. Nothing delights them more than to tear a reputation to pieces or to diagnose the seeds of moral disease in the healthiest subjects. Their religion is called culture, their narrow-mindedness is called insight. Their portraits are sold, along with those of nude harlots and lascivious courtesans, at a shilling per head in the public streets. Two peculiarities distinguish this class of persons to a careful eye—they are as oblivious to the fact that life has a past as that the soul has a future, and they are never by any chance seen in that English society which they profess to understand so thoroughly.

Now, if we carefully consider the question we are discussing, we shall in all possibility find that all the gross and vulgar conceptions of life which are formulated into certain products of art, literature, and criticism, emanate from this Bohemian class. Its members do not, we believe, penetrate far into life of any kind, but where they do penetrate they create the vices they perceive, and reflect phenomena in the distorted mirrors of their own moral consciousness. Possessing no religion, they imagine that English life is

irreligious. Having no faith, they perceive no faith anywhere. Ingenious almost to diablerie, they will prove to you by critical theory that art is simply the method of getting most sweets out of one's living sensations—the knack, to put it metaphorically, of sucking your lollipop so as to extract out of it the best possible flavour. If a man speaks to them earnestly, they will smile and style him “didactic.” If a man writes for them religiously, they will inwardly congratulate themselves on having passed quite beyond “that sort of thing.” These men—and alas! these women—compose some of our poetry, paint some of our pictures, write a good deal of our formal criticism. Is it any wonder, therefore, that the poor bewildered public shakes its head over the terrible accounts put before it, and begins slowly but surely to share the scepticism and flippancy it at first considered so shocking? Is it any wonder that Leg-literature flourishes? Is it any wonder that wise men like Mr. Ruskin rail, and philosophers like Mr. Carlyle despair? There lies the seat of the cancer—there, in the Bohemian fringe of society. Will no courageous hand essay to cut it out? Will no physician come to put his finger in the true seat of the sore? There it is, spreading daily like all cancerous diseases, foul in itself and creating foulness. If we cannot destroy it altogether with some terrible caustic, let us at least take precautions to prevent it from spreading. The disease is worth the remedy, the remedy is worth a prayer.

It is my business in the present pages to deal only with one form of the moral phenomenon, to regard Sensualism only in so far as it affects contemporary poetry. My plan

was at first broader, but I find it beyond my present materials. To deal with the question completely, to pass in review the effects of Sensualism on art, on music, on the drama, and above all to trace its physiological causes and consequences as expressed in all these different directions, would occupy far more time than I am able to bestow on the subject. Let me hope, however, that others may speak, now I have spoken, adding to mine their testimony and their protest.

II.

“ Whilom the sisters nine were vestal maids . . .
 But since, I saw it painted on Fame’s wings,
 The Muses to be woxen wantonings.
 Ye bastard poets, see your progeny ! ”

BISHOP HALL.

THE true history of European poetry is the history of European progress, from the narrow microscopic pedantry of mediæval culture to the large telescopic sweep of modern thought and science. It is no part of my present plan to attempt the historical subject, except in so far as it affects the phenomena of the present day ; and I need only indicate, therefore, how the ever-broadening poetry of humanity has flowed to us in one varying stream of increase since the day when, as Denham sings—

“ Old Chaucer, like the morning star,
 To us discovered day from far.”

Chaucer and his contemporaries were, as all readers know, under deep obligations to the poets and romancists of

mediæval Italy; and it is a most significant token of Chaucer's pre-eminent originality that, while Gower and the rest had only been inspired to imitate what was bad in the great models, he, on the contrary, merely derived inspiration and solace from their music, assimilated what was noble in it, and carefully prepared a breezier and healthier poetic form of his own. What is grandest and best in Chaucer is Chaucer's exclusively. No better proof can be had of his merit as the morning star of the modern school than a careful comparison of him, first with Boccaccio, then with Dante. All the limpid flow of narrative, the concentration and pomp of subject, all the lighter humour and sparkle, are to be found in the "*Decameron*." All the dramatic intensity, the quaint but tender realism, are (with mighty qualities super-added) to be discovered in Dante. But the quaint saline humour, the universality of sympathy, the childlike love of nature, and the supreme piteousness of modern poetry, dawned with the divine author of the "*Canterbury Tales*." Chaucer was emphatically the poet of the bourgeoisie, just as Shakspeare and his brethren were the poets of the feudal idea; but with all these writers alike, with the author of the "*Wife of Bath*" as well as with the creator of Falstaff, humanity was beginning to get such a hearing for itself, and notably on the humorous side of the question, as would be certain in the long-run to blend both ideas, that of feudalism and that of the bourgeoisie, into the great modern sentiment of popular rights, duties, and affections. The great dramatists of the reign of Elizabeth, following in Chaucer's footsteps, appear, under some awful demoniac influence (for individually these men were destitute of beneficence), to have prepared for modern contemplation an unequalled gallery

of human faces and souls—a gallery all-embracing in its range, photographing the meanest as well as the highest, and revealing to us, under all the dazzle and glitter of a sumptuous feudal style, the instincts which all men have in common, the compensations which each owes to the other, and the fair world in which each has an equal and indisputable share. Simply to picture men “in their habits as they live,” no matter under what motive, was the highest possible beneficence ; and this, in the golden dawn of our poetry, was done inimitably, with a beauty of thought and a wealth of resource unknown to any poet that has appeared since.

Such was the dawn of our poetry ; and did ever dawn bid promise of a more glorious day ?

But, alas ! to the reddening of this fair promise succeeded no fulfilment. Just when light seemed fullest, time and season were miraculously altered, and a period arrived, an overclouding of the sun, a portentous darkness, wherein few could tell whether it was night or day. This darkness was of a vaporous nature, miasmatic. It was a fever-cloud generated first in Italy and then blown westward ; finally, after sucking up all that was most unwholesome from the soil of France, to fix itself on England, and breed in its direful shadow a race of monsters whose long line has not ceased from that to the present day.

Just previously to and contemporaneously with the rise of Dante, there had flourished a legion of poets of greater or less ability, but all more or less characterized by affectation, foolishness, and moral blindness : singers of the falsetto school, with ballads to their mistress’s eyebrow, sonnets to their lady’s lute, and general songs of a fiddlestick ; peevish men for the most part, as is the way of all

fleshly and affected beings ; men so ignorant of human subjects and materials as to be driven, in their sheer bankruptcy of mind, to raise Hope, Love, Fear, Rage (everything but Charity) into human entities, and to treat the body and upholstery of a dollish woman as if, in itself, it constituted a whole Universe. In the ways of these poor devils Dante walked a little ; and he has left us, in his "*Vita Nuova*," a book which carries the system of individual fantasy about as near perfection as possible, and (of course) invests a radically absurd line of thought with a fictitious and tremendous interest. The "*Vita Nuova*" is enormously fine in its way, as the self-revelation of a man in whom the world is interested, and to whom many conceits may be freely pardoned. It is quaint, fine, subtle, suggestive ; but its chief value is this, that it was composed, in a tender moment, by the tremendous creature who wrote the story of Roman Catholicism in unfaltering and colossal cipher for the study of all forthcoming ages.

What was great and potent in Dante remained in the "*Divine Comedy*" and bore no seed. What was absurd and unnatural in Dante, mingling with foul exhalations from the brains of his brother poets, formed the miasmatic cloud which obscured all English culture, generated madness even as far north as Hawthornden and Edinburgh, obscured Chaucer for centuries, darkened the way to the vast spaces of the Elizabethan drama, and generally bred in the very bones and marrow of English literature the veriest ague of absurdity ever known to keep human creature crazy. Surrey, a naturally strong man, sickened and died in the fever ; his limpid English just preserving his foolish subjects from total oblivion ; while Wyatt, affected in form as well as in

substance, lingered through a long life of literary disease. Spenser and Drayton caught the complaint early, but, being men of robust genius, survived it. Shakspeare had it, but his mighty spirit almost beautified disease itself, till he cast it off altogether, and clomb to the heaven-kissing hill where he wrote his plays. Poor old John Donne had the strangest possible attacks; he made a hard fight to recover his natural English health, but the reiterated relapses were too much for him; and there he lies, with his books on his breast, quaint as a carven figure on a tomb—and as unreal. How name over all the other victims who died literary death in those days? How call up before the reader the sad shades of Davies, Carew, William Drummond, the two Fletchers, Habington, and all those once famous British bards? Gliding onward through the spectral host, we pass Crashaw, a Rossetti of the period, with twice the genius and half the advantages; and Suckling, immortal by virtue of his one true note—the “Ballad on a Wedding;” and Browne, the Elizabethan Keats, with his falsetto voice and occasional tones of really delicious cunning; till latterly, in a languid and depressed state of mind, we arrive before the prone figure of Cowley, who essayed to drive the very horses of the sun, and came to the cruel earth with a smash so prodigious. Poor ghosts! To think of it! All these persons were admired in their generation. Frankincense of praise and myrrh of flattery had been theirs to the full. They flattered each other, and they tickled the age. What pleased the public mind in Shakspeare was the “quaint conceits” of his “wonderful” sonnets; his plays were nowhere for the time being. The Italian disease raged and devastated art, literature, and society. Now it was the simple sentimental

form, light and dainty, symptomised by such verses as "To Roses in the Bosom of Castara," "Upon Cupid's Death and Burial in Cynthia's Cheeke," or "On a Mole in Celia's Bosom." Again it was the dull metaphysical type, deep-seated and incurable, with its "Negative Love," its "Answer to the Platonics," and "Love's Visibility." At one time the disease was scrofulous and foul-mouthed, sending forth addresses "To His Mistress's going to Bed," and "On the Happiness of a Flea on Celia's Body." At another the religious mania supervened, and all the language of passion was applied to divine things, startling us with coquettish addresses to the Magdalen, to "Mary's Tear," "On the Blessed Virgin's Bashfulness," and so on. But in all these cases, however extraordinary, however fatal, two results could be noted. The performances of the diseased persons afforded intense delight to a certain section of the public, and the amount of contemporary eulogy was almost always in proportion to the fatal nature of the disease.

With Cowley, the epidemic seemed to culminate. This prodigy of success overdid his character, and it seemed impossible for the lover's vein to be carried further by any other ambitious Bottom. Milton corrected his system with the strong tonics of the ancients; and Dryden, when he rose, fortified himself with the disinfectant of Roman satire. Nevertheless the disease lingered in the land, co-operating with new diseases from the corrupt court of France. It would be tiresome indeed to name all the poor creatures, from Cowley to Spratt, who suffered and died, more or less under the fatal influence. It was in positive despair, to resist the epidemic, that English literature hardened into the formal cleanliness of the Addisonian

period. Classicism was used as an antidote, while Ambrose Phillips was delighting "society" with pieces like that "On the Little Lady Charlotte Pulteney drest to go to a Ball." * False love, false heroics, false pastoral pictures, false life, false thought, all more or less consequent on the foul corruptions from Italy and France, had shaken the whole fabric of English literature when Jonathan Swift composed his mock-erotic verses "On a beautiful Young Nymph going to Bed," and Pope & Co. their "Martinus Scriblerus on the Art of Sinking in Poetry;" but neither Pope nor Swift was strong enough to inaugurate a new and nobler art. English poetry was virtually dead.

A tranquil gleam of honest English light came with Cowper, whose patient and gentle services have scarcely yet been rated at their true worth. But the true seeds of a new life had been scattered abroad when Bishop Percy published his "Reliques." These seeds were slow to spring, the slower because they sank so deep. At last, however, Wordsworth came, and English literature was saved. Then, with one loud trumpet-note, Byron amazed matrons and disarmed critics. Then, with a shining face, Coleridge uttered stately syllables of mightiest thought. Then, too, Southey gave his help, now unjustly forgotten. Then Lamb and Hazlitt began to criticize, directing men's eyes back to the true fount of English thought and diction—the tales of Chaucer and the Elizabethan drama. Then Scott arose, simple and deep as the sea—freighted with golden argosies of history and lighted with the innumerable laughter of the waves.

* These verses are worth studying, as showing how the only effect produced on the "poet of the period" by the sight of a little female child was the regret that the infant was not yet old enough "to be made love to."

Then indeed poor England shook off her taint, and felt her heart beat with a truer, freer pulse,—

“For a sweet wind from heaven had come
To blow her cares away.”

Hope had come at last—more than a gleam,—a glorious azure burst. It was sad to think how many centuries had been wasted ; but the invalid-literature of this country was not quite dead.

Strange to say, just at that very moment, when things looked brightest, honest Gifford had to demolish the Della Cruscan school, and Canning and Frere found it necessary to destroy Dr. Darwin. In both of these maniacal manifestations, but particularly in the former, society and the small critics of the day delighted. The Della Cruscan poems were sung to guitars, and warbled by young ladies at their embroidery frames. They had one recommendation—they were harmless. They were neither demoralising nor dirty. They died a very speedy death, when once Gifford took the trouble to exterminate them ; but perhaps they hardly needed so severe an operation. In our own day we have had, besides the Fleshly School under notice, the Spasmodic School, headed by Bailey, Smith, and Dobell ; but these poets possessed great purity, and were unfairly treated. The worst argument against them was their comparative poetic silence after the date of Aytoun's attacks. All these so-called Schools over-exert themselves and end in phthisis. A great poet is a law to himself, and does not work in groups.

After this last futile development, the Italian disease would possibly have died out altogether. That it has not died, has been due to a fresh importation of the obnoxious matter from France. The Scrofulous School of Literature

had been distinguishing itself for many a long year in Paris, but it reached its final and most tremendous development in Charles Baudelaire,—a writer to whom I must now direct the reader's attention.

III.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE.

“Je cherche le vide, et le noir, et le nu !”

“I seek the Black, the Empty, and the Nude !”

Fleurs de Mal.

I HAVE before me, as I write, the portrait of Baudelaire, the memoir by Gautier, the original edition of the “*Fleurs de Mal*,” and the collected edition of Baudelaire's works, published since his death.

Gautier's memoir is a miracle of cunning writing, containing hardly a syllable with which one disagrees, and yet skilfully and secretly poisoning the mind of any unsuspecting reader. The best antidote I can recommend against such clever trash is the tiniest pinch of humour, the least sense of the absurd ; for directly the whole thing is put in the proper light, contempt yields to laughter, and laughter dies away in pity for the poor “æstheticized” figures to whom we are being introduced. It may also be as well, at the same time, to call to mind how even the mighty genius of George Sand, at first so promising and so commanding (in those days when even Mazzini's pure soul did it homage), slowly decomposed under the inner action of the artistic

and self-critical instinct, until it falsified all hopes, and ended in utter demoralisation. This literary finessing, this intellectual fingering, constitutes a tithe of the genius of Hugo, a half of the genius of George Sand, the whole of the genius of Charles Baudelaire and his biographer. A little Shaksperian sense of quiddity would soon show us what a poor, attenuated, miserable scarecrow of humanity Baudelaire was in reality, and what a mere serving-man, self-deluded and self-deluding, is this poor old Gautier-Malvolio, who holds forth, "cross-garter'd," over his grave.

Gautier first met Baudelaire in "that grand salon in the most pure style of Louis XIV.," where the hasheesh-eaters of Paris were wont to hold their meetings; and his description of the furniture of this chamber is very great, quite in the spirit of a French upholsterer. Here is his vignette portrait of Baudelaire as he appeared on that occasion:—

"Son aspect nous frappa : il avait les cheveux coupés très ras et du plus beau noir ; ces cheveux, faisant des pointes régulières sur le front d'une éclatante blancheur, le coiffaient comme une espèce de casque sarrasin ; les yeux, couleur de tabac d'Espagne, avaient un regard spirituel, profond, et d'une pénétration peut-être un peu trop insistante ; quant à la bouche, meublée de dents très-blanches, elle abritait, sous une légère et soyeuse moustache ombrageant son contour, des sinuosités mobiles, voluptueuses et ironiques comme les lèvres des figures peintes par Léonard de Vinci ; le nez, fin et délicat, un peu arrondi, aux narines palpitantes, semblait subodorer de vagues parfums lointains ; une fossette vigoureuse accentuait le menton comme le coup de pouce final du statuaire ; les joues, soigneusement rasées, contrastaient, par leur fleur bleuâtre que veloutait la poudre de riz, avec les nuances vermeilles des pommettes ; le cou, d'une élégance et d'une blancheur féminines, apparaissait dégagé, partant d'un col de chemise rabattu et d'une étroite cravate en madras des Indes et à carreaux. Son vêtement consistait en un paletôt d'une étoffe noire lustrée et brillante, un pantalon noisette, des bas blancs et des escarpins vernis, le tout méticuleusement propre et correct, avec un cachet voulu de simplicité anglaise et comme l'intention de se séparer du genre artiste, à chapeaux de

feutre mou, à vestes de velours, à vareuses rouges, à barbe prolixie et à crinière échevelée. Rien de trop frais ni de trop voyant dans cette tenue rigoureuse. Charles Baudelaire appartenait à ce dandysme sobre qui râpe ses habits avec du papier de verre pour leur ôter l'éclat endimanché et tout battant neuf si cher au philistin et si désagréable pour le vrai gentleman. Plus tard même, il rase sa moustache, trouvant que c'était un reste de vieux chic pittoresque qu'il était puéril et bourgeois de conserver."—*Œuvres de Baudelaire, précédées d'une notice par Théophile Gautier, Paris, 1869.*

This interesting creature, with his nose sniffing "distant perfumes," his carefully-shaven cheeks, and his general air of man-millinery, was in earnest conversation with the "model" Maryx, who, with the immobility acquired in the studio, was reclining on a couch, resting her superb head on a cushion, and attired "in a white robe, quaintly starred with red spots resembling drops of blood!" Hard by, at the window, sat another superb female, known as "La Femme au Serpent," from having sat to Clevinger when he painted his picture of that name. The latter, having thrown on a fauteuil "her mantle of black lace and the most delicious little green hood that ever covered Lucy Hocquet or Madame Baudraud, shook her yellow lioness-locks, still humid, for she came from the swimming school (L'Ecole de Natation), and from all her body, clad in muslin, exhaled like a naiad the fresh perfume of the bath!" In the same company were Jean Fenchères, the sculptor, and Jean Boissard, the latter with "his red mouth, teeth of pearl, and brilliant complexion." One scarcely knows which to admire most in this description,—the writer's fine apotheosis of the *lupanar* into an "artistic decameron," or the avidity with which he seizes on personal traits and on male and female millinery. He is "up" in both under and over-clothing, as worn by both sexes. He is, moreover, candour itself. He

makes no secret of Baudelaire's little weaknesses and his own. "With an air quite simple, natural, and perfectly disengaged, he advanced some axiom satanically monstrous, or sustained with an icy *sang-froid* some theory of a mathematical exactness ; for there was a vigorous method in the development of his absurdities." In a word, it is not denied that Baudelaire was that most unsympathetic of all beings, a cold sensualist, and that he carried into all his pleasures (until they slew him) the dandyism and the self-possession of a true child of Mephistopheles.

After a youth spent in wanderings in the East, and in acquiring, as Gautier naïvely says, "that love of the black Venus, for whom he had always a taste," Baudelaire returned to Paris, rented a little *chambre de garçon*, and assumed all the privileges of a literary life in the most debauched city of the world. His reading, which seems to have been of a very limited nature, developed his already singular disposition into true literary monstrosity, and the morbid nature of his tastes may be gathered from the fact that his first public effort was a translation of the American Tales of Edgar Poe. To Poe he seems to have borne an extraordinary resemblance, both in genius and in character. Equally clever, affected, and cold-blooded ; equally incredulous of goodness and angry at philanthropy ; equally self-indulgent and sensual, he lived as useless a life, died as wretched a death, and left for his legacy books even more worthless — the very dregs of his unhappy and sunless moral nature. Like Poe and Swinburne, he affected innovations in verse, and sought out the most morbid themes for poetical treatment. Encouraged by Poe, he tried to surpass him on his own ground—to triumph

over him in the diablerie of horror. Encouraged in his turn, Mr. Swinburne has attempted to surpass Baudelaire, and to excel even that frightful artist in the representation of abnormal types of diseased lust and lustful disease.

"Art," said Baudelaire in effect, "has but one object, like life—that of exciting in the reader's soul the sensation of enjoyment. What poetry is to life, the drug hasheesh is to me personally, enabling me to extract supreme enjoyment out of the sheerly diabolical ideas of my own mind. I despise humanity, and I approve the devil." Animated by these noble sentiments, he killed himself by self-indulgence, and virtually exclaimed to the youth of France, with his dying breath, "Go ye and do likewise!"

I know well how much may be said in defence of a man like this by a wise and beneficent criticism; but I know, too, that defence has been overwrought, till mercy for the sinner has enlarged into sympathy with the sin. I am well aware, moreover—no man can be better aware—of the *charm* of writers like Baudelaire, and even of a certain service they may do to literature by careful attention to æsthetic form. Having few ideas, they endeavour to express them neatly, and with novelty. But no good can come to life or literature from the atrocious system of painting such figures in the light voluptuous colours of art; of exalting such contemptible persons into first-rate literary positions, and of evading the moral of their lives for the sake of pointing an epigram and delighting the fool. Charles Baudelaire lived and died a slave to his own devil; every line he wrote was slave's work; every picture he ever painted was in one hue—the dark blood-tint of his own shame. And yet it is this man, this dandy of the brothel, this Brummel of the

stews, this fifth-rate *littérateur*, who, adopting to a certain extent the self-explanatory and querulous system of the Italian school of poets, and carefully avoiding the higher issues of that noble school of which Hugo is the living head, has been chosen (by no angel certainly) to be the god-father as it were of the modern Fleshly School, and thus to fill the select salon of English literature with a perfume to which the smell of Mrs. Aphra Behn's books is savoury, and that of Catullus' "*lepidum novum libellum*" absolutely delicious. ✓

This is our double misfortune—to have a nuisance, and to have it at second hand. We might have been more tolerant to an unclean thing, if it had been in some sense a product of the soil. We have never been foolish purists, here in England. We freely forgave Byron many a wicked turn, because we knew he loved much, because we saw how much he was the product of national forces darkly working to the light. We welcomed Goethe, even when he sent the "Elective Affinities" and the cerebellic autobiographies. But to be overrun with the brood of an inferior French sonneteer, whose only originality was his hideousness of subject, whose only merit was in his nasal appreciation of foul odours, surely that is far too much: it would have been a little too much twenty years ago, when the Empire began creating its viper's nest in the heart of France; it is a hundred times too much *now*, when the unclean place has been burnt with avenging fire.

A few years before his death, Baudelaire published his chief work—"Fleurs de Mal." This book was a little too strong even for Paris under the Empire; so the censor came down, and some of the vilest poems were ruthlessly

expunged. But Baudelaire gained his end, and secured a spurious notoriety. Some years later Mr. Swinburne thought the French poet's success worthy of emulation, and he therefore published his "Poems and Ballads," which was so very hot that his publishers dropped it like a blazing cinder in the very month of publication, and only one publisher, who shall be nameless, had the courage to lift it up.

— All that is worst in Mr. Swinburne belongs to Baudelaire. The offensive choice of subject, the obtrusion of unnatural passion, the blasphemy, the wretched animalism, are all taken intact out of the "*Fleurs de Mal*." Pitiful! that any sane man, least of all any English poet, should think this dunghill worthy of importation! In the centre of his collection Baudelaire placed the most horrid poem ever written by man, a poem unmatched for simple hideousness even in Rome during the decadence—a piece worthy to be spoken by Ascylos in Petronius Arbiter—and entitled "*Femmes Damnées*." The interlocutors in this piece are two women, who have just been guilty of the vilest act conceivable in human debauchery, but the theme and the treatment are too loathsome for description. Encouraged by the hideousness of "*Femmes Damnées*," Mr. Swinburne attempted to beat it in "*Anactoria*," a poem the subject of which is again that branch of crime which is generally known as the Sapphic passion. It would be tedious, apart from the unsavouriness of the subject, to pursue the analogy much further through individual poems. Perhaps the best plan is to give a few specimens of Baudelaire's quality, and leave the reader to compare them with Mr. Swinburne's book at leisure.

— In the very first poem of his collection Baudelaire avows

his true character, and accuses the reader of being not a whit better :—

“Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère !”

He purposes, he says, on his way (the way of all humanity) down to absolute Hell, to pass in review a few of the horrors he sees on his path. His way lies—

“Parmi les chacals, les panthères, les lices,
Les singes, les scorpions, les vautours, les serpents,
Les monstres glapissants, hurlants, grognants, rampants
Dans la ménagerie infâme de nos vices !”

And of all these monsters the most infernal is—L'Ennui ! The very next poem sweetly chronicles the birth of the Poet, whose mother, affrighted and blaspheming, stretches her hands to God, crying : “Cursed be that night of fleeting pleasure, when my womb conceived my punishment !” In the next poem the poet is compared to the albatross, splendid on the wing, but almost unable to walk ; and the comparison strikes me as very applicable to this poet himself, only that his whole book is a waddling, unwieldy, and unsuccessful attempt to begin a flight. In a number of short lyrics he talks of poetry, music, and life, without affording us much edification (save in a really powerful picture called “Don Juan in Hell”) till he begins to sing, not the delights of the flesh, but the morbid feelings of satiety. Accustomed to the Swinburnian female, we at once recognise her here in the original, as the serpent that dances, the cat that scratches and cries, and the large-limbed sterile creature who never conceives. She “bites,” of course :—

“Pour exercer les dents à ce jeu singulier,
Il se faut chaque jour un cœur au râtelier !”

She has "cold eyelids that shut like a jewel :"—

"Tes yeux, où rien ne se révèle
De doux ni d'amer,
Sont *deux bijoux froids* !"

She is cold and "sterile :"—

"La froide majesté de la femme stérile !"

She is, necessarily, like "a snake :"—

. . . "un serpent qui danse," &c., &c.

She is, in fact, Faustine, Mary Stuart, Our Lady of Pain, Sappho, and all the rest,—quite as nasty, and to all intents and purposes, in spite of her attraction for young poets, seemingly as undesirable.

It is quite impossible for me, without long quotation, to fully represent the unpleasantness of Baudelaire, with his "vampires," his "cats," and "cat-like women," his poisons, his fiends, his phantoms, his long menagerie of horrors, his long catalogue of debaucheries. At one time we are in a brothel, and the poet is lying by the side of a dreadful Jewess with "cold eyelids :"—

"Une nuit que j'étais près d'une affreuse Juive,
Comme au long d'un cadavre un cadavre étendu !"

At another time we hear the poet saying to a fair companion—"Seek not my heart ; the beasts have eaten it." Grim and wearied as he is, our poet is not above the favourite conceits of his school :—

"Tes hanches sont amoureuses
De ton dos et de ses seins,
Et tu ravis les coussins
Par tes poses langoureuses !"

And this is quite in the symbolizing style of the Italian school, of which I shall give many examples when treating of Mr. Rossetti :—

" *La Haine est un ivrogne* au fond d'une taverne,
Qui sent toujours la soif naître de la liqueur
Et se multiplier comme l'hydre de Lerne.

"—Mais les buveurs heureux connaissent leur vainqueur,
Et la Haine est vouée à ce sort lamentable
De ne pouvoir jamais s'endormir sous la table !"

At one time we have a poem on "her hair," in the course of which we learn (what indeed we should have guessed) that, as other persons delight in love's "music," he (Baudelaire) revels in its "perfume." He is still insatiable, and yet uncomplimentary, actually comparing his attack on her "cold beauty" to the attack of a swarm of worms on a corpse ("comme après un cadavre un chœur de vermisseaux !") and yet crying fiercely :—

"Je chéris, O bête implacable et cruelle !
Jusqu'à cette froideur par où tu m'es plus belle !"

He finds delight in tracing resemblances between this marble person and his cat :—

"Viens, mon beau chat, sur mon cœur amoureux ;
Retiens griffes de ta patte,
Et laisse-moi plonger dans tes beaux yeux
Mêlés de métal et d'agate." (Page 135.)

But it would be tedious indeed to trace all the morbid sensations of such a lover as this ; at Paris or in the East, he is equally used up and yet insatiable ; and after having tried all sorts of complexions, from the pale wax-like Jewess of the Parisian brothel to the black and lissom beauty of Malabar, he finds himself still wretched and disgusted with human nature. It is soon quite obvious that he is possessed by the demon of Hasheesh. Thoughts horrible and foul surge through his brain as the filth drives through a sewer. At least half of all the "Fleurs de Mal" read as if they had

been written by a man in one of the worst stages of delirium tremens. No one certainly can accuse him of making crime look beautiful. To him, in his own words,

“ La Débauche et la Mort sont deux aimables filles ! ”

His crime is, that he sees *only* these two shapes on all the solid earth, and avers that there is nothing left for men but to sin and die. His dreams and thoughts are wretched. The sun rises, and immediately he pictures it shining, not into happy homes, but into dens of crime and ghastly hospitals. Night comes, but sleep comes not ; and he only cries :—

“ Voici le soir charmant, ami du criminel ;
Il vient comme un complice, à pas de loup ; le ciel
Se ferme lentement comme une grande alcôve,
Et l’homme impatient se change en bête fauve.”

The gas-jets of prostitution are lit, and flare on the doomed faces of pale women and jaded men. Some few men sit at happy hearths, but the majority “have never lived.” On such a night, doubtless, he composed such poems as this, which I quote entire in all its morbid pain and horror :—

“ HORREUR SYMPATHIQUE.

“ “ De ce ciel bizarre et livide,
Tourmenté comme ton destin,
Quels pensers dans ton âme vide
Descendent ?—Réponds, libertin.’

“ —Insatiablement avide
De l’obscur et de l’incertain,
Je ne geindrai pas comme Ovide
Chassé du paradis latin.

“ Cieux déchirés comme des grèves
En vous se mire mon orgueil !
Vos vastes nuages en deuil

Sont les corbillards de mes rêves,
 Et vos lueurs sont le reflet
 De l'Enfer où mon cœur se plaît !”

Truly enough did Edward Thierry say, in writing of this poetry, that “it is sorrow which absolves and justifies it. The poet does not delight in the spectacle of evil.” Still, Baudelaire broods over evil things with a tremendous persistency, a morbid satisfaction, which shows a mind radically diseased and a nature utterly heartless. In and out of season, he invoked the spirit of Horror. Jaded with self-indulgence, he had a mad pleasure in considering the world a charnel-house, and in posing the figures of Love and Beauty in the agonies of disease and the ghastly stillness of death. As a necessary pendant to his pictures of human ugliness, he delighted to add a few glimpses of divine malignity. Looking to the section of his book called “*Révolte*,” we find where Mr. Swinburne got his first lessons in blasphemy. In “The Denial of St. Peter” we have the following picture of the Deity, quite in the fleshly manner :—

“Comme un tyran gorgé de viande et de vins,
 Il s'endort au doux bruit de nos affreux blasphèmes !”

And after passing in review the horrible sufferings of Christ, he concludes bitterly :—

“Saint Pierre a renié Jésus. . . . *Il a bien fait !*”

In another poem he draws a series of contrasts between the race of Cain and the race of Abel,—in other words, between the domestic type of humanity and the outcast type, —concluding in these memorable words :—

“Race de Caïn, au ciel monte
 Et sur la terre jette Dieu !”

—words which bear a sort of resemblance, in their foolish and reckless no-meaning, to that passage in Mr. Swinburne's writings wherein the Devil is described as "*playing dice with God*" for the soul of Faustine. Next comes a piece entitled "*Les Litanies de Satan*," a prayer to the evil one :—

" Père adoptif de ceux *qu'en sa noire colère*
Du paradis terrestre a chassés Dieu le Père !"

and in conclusion a few lines called "Prayer :"—

" Gloire et louange à toi, Satan, dans les hauteurs
Du Ciel, où tu régneras, et dans les profondeurs
De l'Enfer, où, vaincu, tu rêves en silence !
Fais que mon âme un jour, sous l'Arbre de Science,
Près de toi se repose, à l'heure ou sur ton front
Comme un Temple nouveau ses rameaux s'épandront."

It will hardly be contended that Mr. Swinburne has surpassed this, although his effusions are wilder and more distorted ; and we may well rejoice, meanwhile, that our contemporary blasphemy, as well as so much of our contemporary bestiality, is no home-product, but an importation transplanted from the French Scrofulous School, and conveyed, with no explanation of its origin, at second hand.

Of a similar character to Baudelaire's "*Fleurs de Mal*" are his "*Petites Poèmes en Prose*," in which this cynic of the shambles touches on many themes besides lust and ennui, and touches none that he does not darken. There is here, as in the "*Fleurs*," an occasional delicacy of touch, a frequent delicacy of perfume, which deepens the prevalent horror and despair of the surrounding chapters. In one piece he compares the public to a dog, which flies in horror when offered some delicate scent, but greedily devours

human ordure ; and although he wishes us to infer that his own wares are too fine for so coarse a monster, the reader cannot help feeling that there is something in the nature of excrement in his very choice of a foul metaphor to express his meaning. Indeed, throughout all his writings there is a parade of the olfactory faculty, which awakens the suspicion that Baudelaire, like Fabullus, had one day, after smelling some choice unguent, prayed God to "make him all nose"—

"Quod tu cum olfacies, Deos rogabis,
Totum ut te faciant, Fabulle, nasum !

CAT., lib. xiii.

—and that the prayer had been actually granted. There is plenty of sensitiveness to smell, to touch, even to colour ; there is even a kind of perception, neither very acute nor very exquisite, of the beauties of external form ; but of that higher sensibility which perceives the subtle *nuances* of spiritual life and trembles to the beating of a tender human heart, there is not one solitary sign. This poetry is like absinthe, comparatively harmless perhaps if sipped in small quantities well diluted, but fatal if taken (as by Mr. Swinburne) in all its native strength and abomination.

Here I must leave the writings of Charles Baudelaire, only observing in conclusion that, in spite of their seeming originality, they belong really to the Italian school, in so far as they are the posings of an affected person before a mirror, the self-anatomy of a morbid nature, the satiated love-sonnets of a sensualist who is out of tune with the world and out of harmony with the life of men. They are, from another point of view, the *reductio ad horribilem* of that intellectual sensualism which Goethe (in one of a giant's weak moments)

founded, and which Heine repeated with a shriller and more mocking tone in his "Buch der Lieder." But Baudelaire, not content with playing with wickedness occasionally, as Goethe did, not strong enough to gibe and jeer at it, as Heine did, and too morally weak ever to soar beyond it into the clear region inhabited by both these masters in their best moments, formed the monstrous *dissecta membra* of vice into the poetic Vampire we have been examining. There are flashes of beauty in the creature's eyes at times, but they scarcely charm us, and we willingly pass away from the moral dungeon in which it lurks.

A few years ago Baudelaire died. Mr. Swinburne immediately commemorated his death in some verses quite worthy of the deceased himself. Since that period, I am happy to say, Mr. Swinburne seems to have partly shaken off the horrible influence of the "Fleurs de Mal." Although, in his political effusions, the same sterile woman of the amours is seen sitting (as Mater Dolorosa) by the wild wayside,

"In a rent stained raiment, the robe of a cast-off bride,"
and as France,

"Spat upon, trod upon, whored!"

and although the blasphemy is repeated tenfold in a series of aimless attacks on a Deity who is assumed to be a shadow, there are not wanting signs that the poet is waking up from an evil dream. The Sapphic vein of Baudelaire has been abandoned to begin with. Next, let the same writer's blasphemous vein be abandoned too. Then, let Mr. Swinburne burn all his French books, go forth into the world, look men and women in the face, try to seek some

nobler inspiration than the smile of harlotry and the shriek of atheism—and there will be hope for him. Thus far, he has given us nothing but borrowed rubbish, but even in his manner of giving there has been something of genius. His own voice may be worth hearing, when he chooses, once and for ever, to abandon the falsetto.

In the discussion which follows I have scarcely included Mr. Swinburne, because he is obviously capable of rising out of the fleshly stage altogether; and I have said little of Mr. Morris, because he has done some noble work quite outside his ordinary performances as a tale-telling poet. I have chosen rather to confine my attention to the gentleman who is formally recognised as the head of the school, who avows his poems to be perfectly "mature," and who has taken many years of reflection before formally appealing to public judgment. Far too self-possessed to indulge in the riotous follies of the author of "Chastelard," and infinitely too self-conscious to busy himself with the dainty tale-telling of the author of the "Earthly Paradise," the writer whose works I am about to examine has carefully elaborated a series of lyrical and semi-dramatic poems in the mediæval manner, with certain qualities superadded which I shall have to criticize severely, and with the faults and insincerities so cunningly *disguised* that they seldom lurk on the surface in such a way as to awaken immediate suspicion.

Before turning to the writer in question, let me add a few words on the Fleshly School in general. What a great master has touched at one point of his poetic genius, has been expanded by the erotic school into a whole system of poetry in itself.

In the sweep of one single poem, the weird and doubtful "Vivien," Mr. Tennyson has concentrated all the epicene force which, wearisomely expanded, constitutes the characteristic of the writers at present under consideration ; and if in "Vivien" he has indicated for them the bounds of sensualism in art, he has in "Maud," in the dramatic person of the hero, afforded distinct precedent for the hysteric tone and overloaded style which is now so familiar to readers of Mr. Swinburne. The fleshliness of "Vivien" may indeed be described as the distinct quality held in common by all the members of the last sub-Tennysonian school,* and it is a quality which becomes unwholesome when there is no moral or intellectual quality to temper and control it. Fully conscious of this themselves, the fleshly gentlemen have bound themselves by solemn league and covenant to extol fleshliness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art ; to aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought, and by inference that the body is greater than the soul, and sound superior to sense ; and that the poet, properly to develop his poetic faculty, must be an intellectual hermaphrodite, to whom the very facts of day and night are lost in a whirl of æsthetic terminology. After Mr. Tennyson has probed the depths of modern speculation in a series of commanding moods, all right and interesting in him as the reigning personage, the "walking gentlemen,"

* I say sub-Tennysonian because these gentlemen, with all their affinities to the Italian and French race of sonnetteers, follow Tennyson in the historical sense, and touch nothing in their poetry which he has not lightly touched in some way. The ways of a great poet lead him in all directions, into all moods, while the way of a small poet is narrow and without variety. The gain of *good* in the Pre-Raphaelite style comes from the laureate ; what is *bad* in it comes from Italy and France.

knowing that something of the sort is expected from all leading performers, bare their bosoms and aver that *they* are creedless; the only possible question here being, if any disinterested person cares whether they are creedless or not—their self-revelation on that score being so perfectly uncalled for. It is time, nevertheless, to ascertain whether any of these gentlemen has actually in himself the making of a leading performer. It would be scarcely worth while to inquire into their pretensions on merely literary grounds, because sooner or later all literature finds its own level, whatever criticism may say or do in the matter; but it unfortunately happens in the present case that the Fleshly School of verse-writers are, so to speak, public offenders, because they are diligently spreading the seeds of disease broadcast wherever they are read and understood. Their complaint too is catching, and carries off many young persons. What the complaint is, and how it works, may now be seen on a very slight examination of the works of Mr. Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

IV.

MR. DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

“Who put bayes into blind Cupid’s fist,
That *he* should crown what laureates him list?”

BISHOP HALL.

MR. ROSSETTI has been known for many years as a painter of exceptional powers, who, for reasons satisfactory to himself, has shrunk from publicly exhibiting his pictures, and

from allowing anything like a popular estimate to be formed of their qualities. He belongs, or is said to belong, to the so-called Pre-Raphaelite school, a school which is generally considered to exhibit much genius for colour, and great indifference to perspective. It would be unfair to judge the painter by the glimpses I have had of his works, or by the photographs which are sold of the principal paintings. Judged by the photographs, he is an artist who conceives unpleasantly, and draws ill. Like Mr. Simeon Solomon, however, with whom he seems to have many points in common, he is distinctively a colourist, and of his capabilities in colour I cannot speak, though I should guess that they are good ; for if there is any quality by which his poems are specially marked, it is a great sensitiveness to hues and tints as conveyed in poetic epithet. On the other hand, those qualities which impress the casual spectator of the photographs from his pictures are to be found abundantly among his verses. There is the same thinness and transparency of design, the same combination of the simple and the grotesque, the same morbid deviation from healthy forms of life, the same sense of weary, wasting, yet exquisite sensuality ; nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane ; a superfluity of extreme sensibility, of delight in affected forms, hues, and tints, and a deep-seated indifference to all agitating forces and agencies, all tumultuous griefs and sorrows, all the thunderous stress of life, and all the straining storm of speculation. Mr. Morris is often pure, fresh, and wholesome as his own great model ; Mr. Swinburne startles us more than once by some fine flash of insight ; but the mind of Mr. Rossetti is like a glassy mere, broken only by the

dive of some water-bird or the motion of floating insects, and brooded over by an atmosphere of insufferable closeness, with a light blue sky above it, sultry depths mirrored within it, and a surface so thickly sown with water-lilies that it retains its glassy smoothness even in the strongest wind. Judged relatively to his poetic associates, Mr. Rossetti must be pronounced inferior to either. He cannot tell a pleasant story like Mr. Morris, nor forge alliterative thunderbolts like Mr. Swinburne. It must be conceded, nevertheless, that he is neither so glibly imitative as the one, nor so transcendently superficial as the other.

Although he has been known for many years as a poet as well as a painter—as a painter and poet idolized by his own family and personal associates—and although he has often appeared in print as a contributor to magazines, Mr. Rossetti did not formally appeal to the public until rather more than a year ago, when he published a copious volume of poems, with the announcement that the book, although it contained pieces composed at intervals during a period of many years, “included nothing which the author believed to be immature.” This work was inscribed to his brother, Mr. William Rossetti, who, having written much both in poetry and criticism, will perhaps be known to bibliographers as the editor of the worst edition of Shelley which has ever seen the light. No sooner had the work appeared than the chorus of eulogy began. “The book is satisfactory from end to end,” wrote Mr. Morris in the *Academy*; “I think these lyrics, with all their other merits, the most complete of their time; nor do I know what lyrics of any time are to be called *great*, if we are to deny the title to these.” On the

same subject Mr. Swinburne went into a hysteria of admiration : "golden affluence," "jewel-coloured words," "chastity of form," "harmonious nakedness," "consummate fleshly sculpture;" and so on in Mr. Swinburne's well-known manner when reviewing his friends. Other critics, with a singular similarity of phrase, followed suit. Strange to say, moreover, no one accused Mr. Rossetti of naughtiness. What had been heinous in Mr. Swinburne was majestic exquisiteness in Mr. Rossetti. Yet I question if there is anything in the unfortunate "Poems and Ballads" more questionable on the score of thorough nastiness than many pieces in Mr. Rossetti's collection. Mr. Swinburne was wilder, more outrageous, more blasphemous, and his subjects were more atrocious in themselves; yet the hysterical tone slew the animalism, the furiousness of epithet lowered the sensation; and the first feeling of disgust at such themes as "Laus Veneris" and "Anactoria" faded away into comic amazement. It was only a little mad boy letting off squibs; not a great strong man, who might be really dangerous to society. "I *will* be naughty!" screamed the little boy; but, after all, what did it matter? It is quite different, however, when a grown person, with the self-control and easy audacity of actual experience, comes forward to chronicle his amorous sensations, and, first proclaiming in a loud voice his literary maturity, and consequent responsibility, shamelessly prints and publishes such a piece of writing as this sonnet on "Nuptial Sleep:"—

*"At length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart :
And as the last slow sudden drops are shed
From sparkling eaves when all the storm has fled,
So singly flagged the pulses of each heart.*

*Their bosoms sundered, with the opening start
 Of married flowers to either side outspread
 From the knit stem ; yet still their mouths, burnt red,
 Fawned on each other where they lay apart.*

“ Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams,
 And their dreams watched them sink, and slid away.
 Slowly their souls swam up again, through gleams
 Of watered light and dull drowned waifs of day ;
 Till from some wonder of new woods and streams
 He woke, and wondered more : for there she lay.”

This, then, is “ the golden affluence of words, the firm outline, the justice and chastity of form.” / Here is a full-grown man, presumably intelligent and cultivated, putting on record, for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness. I am no purist in such matters. I hold the sensual part of our nature to be as holy as the spiritual or intellectual part, and I believe that such things must find their equivalent in art ; but it is neither poetic, nor manly, nor even human, to obtrude such things as the themes of whole poems. It is simply nasty. Nasty as it is, we are very mistaken if many readers do not think it nice. What says the author of “ A Scourge for Paper Persecutors,” in 1625, of similar literature ?—

“ Fine wit is shown therein, but finer ’twere
 If not attired in such bawdy geare ;
 But be it as it will, the coyest dames
 In private read it for their closet games !”

English society of one kind purchases the *Day's Doings*. English society of another kind goes into ecstasy over Mr. Solomon's pictures—pretty pieces of morality, such as "Love dying by the breath of Lust." There is not much to choose between the two objects of admiration, except that painters like Mr. Solomon lend actual genius to worthless subjects, and thereby produce veritable monsters—like the lovely devils that danced round St. Anthony. Mr. Rossetti owes his so-called success with our "aunts" and "grand-mothers" to the same causes. In poems like "Nuptial Sleep," the man who is too sensitive to exhibit his pictures, and so modest that it takes him years to make up his mind to publish his poems, parades his private sensations before a coarse public, and is gratified by their idiotic applause.

It must not be supposed that all Mr. Rossetti's poems are made up of trash like this. They contain some fine pictures of nature, occasional passages of real meaning, much clever phraseology, lines of peculiar sweetness, and epithets chosen with true literary cunning. But the fleshly feeling is everywhere. Sometimes, as in "The Stream's Secret," it adds greatly to our emotion of pleasure at perusing a finely wrought poem; at other times, as in the "Last Confession," it is somewhat held in check by the exigencies of a powerful situation and the strength of a dramatic speaker; but it is generally in the foreground, flushing the whole poem with unhealthy rose-colour, stifling the senses with overpowering sickness, as of too much civet. Mr. Rossetti is never dramatic, never impersonal—always attitudinising, posturing, and describing his own exquisite emotions. He is the "Blessed Damozel," leaning over the "gold bar of heaven," and seeing

“Time like a pulse shake fierce
Thro’ all the worlds;”

he is “heaven-horn Helen, Sparta’s queen,” whose “each twin breast is an apple sweet;” he is Lilith, the first wife of Adam; he is the rosy Virgin of the poem called “Ave,” and the Queen in the “Staff and Scrip;” he is “Sister Helen” melting her waxen man; he is all these, just as surely as he is Mr. Rossetti soliloquising over Jenny in her London lodging, or the very nuptial person writing erotic sonnets to his wife. In petticoats or pantaloons, in modern times or in the middle ages, he is just Mr. Rossetti, a fleshly person, with nothing particular to tell us or teach us, with extreme self-control, a strong sense of colour, and a most affected choice of Latin diction. Amid all his “affluence of jewel-coloured words,” he has not given us one rounded and noteworthy piece of art, though his verses are all art; not one poem which is memorable for its own sake, and quite separable from the displeasing identity of the composer. The nearest approach to a perfect whole is the “Blessed Damozel,” a peculiar poem, placed first in the book, perhaps by accident, perhaps because it is a key to the poems which follow. This poem appeared in a rough shape many years ago in the *Germ*, an unwholesome periodical started by the Pre-Raphaelites, and suffered, after gasping through a few feeble numbers, to die the death of all such publications. In spite of its affected title, and of numberless affectations throughout the text, the “Blessed Damozel” has merits of its own, and a few lines of real genius. I have heard it described as the record of actual grief and love, or, in simple words, the apotheosis of one actually lost by the writer; but, without having any private knowledge of the

circumstance of its composition, I feel that such an account of the poem is inadmissible. It does not contain one single note of sorrow. It is a "composition," and a clever one. Read the opening stanzas :—

"The blessed damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of water stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.

"Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn."

This is a careful sketch for a picture, which, worked into actual colour by a master, might have been worth seeing. The steadiness of hand lessens as the poem proceeds, and although there are several passages of considerable power, —such as that where, far down the void,

"this earth
Spins like a fretful midge,"

or that other, describing how

"the curled moon
Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf,"—

the general effect is that of a queer old painting on a missal, very affected and very odd. What moved the British criticaster to ecstasy in this poem seems to me very sad nonsense indeed, or, if not sad nonsense, very meretricious

affectation. Thus, I have seen the following verses quoted with enthusiasm, as italicised—

“And still she bowed herself and stooped
 Out of the circling charm;
Until her bosom must have made
The bar she leaned on warm,
 And the lilies lay as if asleep
 Along her bended arm.

“From the fixed place of Heaven she saw
Time like a pulse shake fierce
Thro’ all the worlds. Her gaze still strove
 Within the gulf to pierce
 Its path; and now she spoke as when
 The stars sang in their spheres.”

It seems to me that all these lines are very bad, with the exception of the two admirable lines ending the first verse, and that the italicised portions are quite without merit, and almost without meaning. On the whole, one feels disheartened and amazed at the poet who, in the nineteenth century, talks about “damozels,” “citherns,” and “citoles,” and addresses the mother of Christ as the “Lady Mary,”—

“With her five handmaidens, whose names
 Are five sweet symphonies,
 Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
 Margaret, and Rosalys.”

A suspicion is awakened that the writer is laughing at us. We hover uncertainly between picturesqueness and namby-pamby, and the effect, as Artemus Ward would express it, is “weakening to the intellect.” The thing would have been almost too much in the shape of a picture, though the workmanship might have made amends. The truth is, that

literature, and more particularly poetry, is in a very bad way when one art gets hold of another, and imposes upon it its conditions and limitations. In the first few verses of the "Damozel" we have the subject, or part of the subject, of a picture, and the inventor should either have painted it or left it alone altogether; and, had he done the latter, the world would have lost nothing. Poetry is something more than painting; and an idea will not become a poem because it is too smudgy for a picture.

In a short notice from a well-known pen, giving the best estimate we have seen of Mr. Rossetti's power as a poet, the *North American Review* offers a certain explanation for affectation such as that of Mr. Rossetti. The writer suggests that "it may probably be the expression of genuine moods of mind in natures too little comprehensive." We would rather believe that Mr. Rossetti lacks comprehension than that he is deficient in sincerity; yet really, to paraphrase the words which Johnson applied to Thomas Sheridan, Mr. Rossetti is affected, naturally affected, but it must have taken him a great deal of trouble to become what we now see him—such an excess of affectation is not in nature.* There is very little writing in the volume spontaneous in the sense that some of Swinburne's verses are spontaneous; the poems all look as if they had taken a great deal of trouble. The grotesque mediævalism of "Stratton Water" and "Sister Helen," the mediæval classicism of "Troy Town," the false and shallow mysticism of "Eden Bower," are one and all essentially imitative, and must have caused

* "Why, sir, Sherry is dull, *naturally* dull; but it must have taken him a *great deal of trouble* to become what we now see him—such an excess of stupidity is not in nature."—*Boswell's Life*.

the writer much pains. It is time, indeed, to point out that Mr. Rossetti is a poet possessing great powers of assimilation and some faculty for concealing the nutriment on which he feeds. Setting aside the "*Vita Nuova*" and the early Italian poems, which are familiar to many readers by his own excellent translations, Mr. Rossetti may be described as a writer who has yielded, to an unusual extent, to the complex influences of the literature surrounding him at the present moment. He has the painter's imitative power developed in proportion to his lack of the poet's conceiving imagination. He reproduces to a nicety the manner of an old ballad, a trick in which Mr. Swinburne is also an adept. Cultivated readers, moreover, will recognise in every one of these poems the tone of Mr. Tennyson broken up by the style of Mr. and Mrs. Browning, and disguised here and there by the eccentricities of the Pre-Raphaelites. The "*Burden of Nineveh*" is a philosophical edition of "*Recollections of the Arabian Nights*;" "*A Last Confession*" and "*Dante at Verona*" are, in the minutest trick and form of thought, suggestive of Mr. Browning; and that the sonnets have been largely moulded and inspired by Mrs. Browning, especially in points of phraseology, can be ascertained by any critic who will compare them with the "*Sonnets from the Portuguese*." Much remains, nevertheless, that is Mr. Rossetti's own. I at once recognise as his own property such passages as this:—

"I looked up
And saw where a brown-shouldered harlot leaned
Half through a tavern window thick with vine.
Some man had come behind her in the room
And caught her by her arms, and she had turned
With that coarse empty laugh on him, as now

He *munched her neck with kisses, while the vine
Crawled in her back.*"

Or this :—

"As I stooped, her own lips rising there
Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth."

Or this :—

"Have seen your lifted silken skirt
Advertise dainties through the dirt!"

Or this :—

"What more prize than love to impel thee,
Grip and lip my limbs as I tell thee!"*

Passages like these are the common stock of the walking gentlemen of the Fleshly School. I cannot forbear expressing my wonder, by the way, at the kind of women whom it seems the unhappy lot of these gentlemen to encounter. I have lived nearly as long in the world as they have, but never yet came across persons of the other sex who conduct themselves in the manner described. Females who bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam, and in a general way slaver over their lovers, must surely possess some extraordinary qualities to counteract their otherwise most offensive mode of conducting themselves. It appears, however, on examination, that their poet-lovers conduct themselves in a similar manner. They, too, bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat,

* Mr. Rossetti accuses me of garbling these four extracts, and alleges that they have a totally different effect when read with their context. In reply to this, let me observe that the four poems which supply these four extracts are full of coarseness from the first line to the last, and that no extract can fitly convey their unwholesomeness and indecency. See *après*, p. 64.

writhe, twist, wriggle, foam, and slaver, in a style frightful to hear of. At times, in reading such books as this, one cannot help wishing that things had remained for ever in the asexual state described in Mr. Darwin's great chapter on Palingenesis. We get very weary of this protracted hankering after a person of the other sex; it seems meat, drink, thought, sinew, religion, for the Fleshly School. There is no limit to the fleshliness, and Mr. Rossetti finds in it its own religious justification much in the same way as Holy Willie:—

“ Maybe thou let'st this fleshly thorn
 Perplex thy servant night and morn,
 'Cause he's so gifted.
 If so, thy hand must e'en be borne,
 Until thou lift it.”

Whether he is writing of the holy Damozel, or of the Virgin herself, or of Lilith, or of Helen, or of Dante, or of Jenny the street-walker, he is fleshly all over, from the roots of his hair to the tip of his toes; never a true lover merging his identity into that of the beloved one; never spiritual, never tender; always self-conscious and æsthetic. “ Nothing in human life,” says a modern writer, “ is so utterly remorseless—not love, not hate, not ambition, not vanity—as the artistic or æsthetic instinct morbidly developed to the suppression of conscience and feeling;” and at no time do we feel more fully impressed with this truth than after the perusal of “ Jenny,” in some respects the cleverest poem in the volume, and in all respects the poem best indicative of the true quality of the writer's humanity. It is a production which bears signs of having been suggested by my own quasi-lyrical poems, which it copies in the style of title,

and particularly by "Artist and Model ;"* but certainly Mr. Rossetti cannot be accused, as I have been accused, of maudlin sentiment and affected tenderness. The first two lines are perfect :—

" Lazy laughing languid Jenny,
Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea ;"

and the poem is a soliloquy of the poet—who has been spending the evening in dancing at a casino—over his partner, whom he has accompanied home to the usual style of lodgings occupied by such ladies, and who has fallen asleep with her head upon his knee, while he wonders, in a wretched pun—

" Whose person or whose purse may be
The lodestar of your reverie ?"

The soliloquy is long, and in some parts beautiful, despite a very constant suspicion that we are listening to an emasculated Mr. Browning, whose whole tone and gesture, so to speak, is occasionally introduced with startling fidelity ; and there are here and there glimpses of actual thought and insight, over and above the picturesque touches which belong to the writer's true profession, such as that where, at daybreak—

" lights creep in
Past the gauze curtains half drawn-to,
And the lamp's doubled shade grows blue."

What I object to in this poem is not the subject, which

* Commenting on this remark, Mr. Rossetti avers that he has "never read" my poems, and that, moreover, "Jenny" was written thirteen years ago.

any writer may be fairly left to choose for himself; nor anything particularly vicious in the poetic treatment of it; nor any bad blood bursting through in special passages. But the whole tone, without being more than usually coarse, seems heartless. There is not a drop of piteousness in Mr. Rossetti. He is just to the outcast, even generous; severe to the seducer; sad even at the spectacle of lust in dimity and fine ribbons. Notwithstanding all this, and a certain delicacy and refinement of treatment unusual with this poet, the poem is repelling, and one likes Mr. Rossetti least after its perusal. The "Blessed Damsel" is puzzling, the "Song of the Bower" is amusing, the love-sonnet is depressing and sickening, but "Jenny," though distinguished by less special viciousness of thought and style than any of these, fairly makes the reader lose patience. Its fleshliness is apparent at a glance; one perceives that the scene was fascinating less through its human tenderness than because it, like all the others, possessed an *inherent* quality of Animalism. "The whole work," ("Jenny,") writes Mr. Swinburne, "is worthy to fill its place for ever as one of the most perfect poems of an age or generation. There is just the same life-blood and breadth of poetic interest in this episode of a London street and lodging as in the song of 'Troy Town' and the song of 'Eden Bower;' just as much, and no jot more,"—to which last statement I cordially assent; for there is bad blood in all, and breadth of poetic interest in none. "Vengeance of Jenny's case," indeed!—when such a poet as this comes fawning over her, with tender compassion in one eye and æsthetic enjoyment in the other!

It is time that I permitted Mr. Rossetti to speak for

himself, which I will do by quoting a fairly representative poem entire :—

“ LOVE-LILY.

“ Between the hands, between the brows,
Between the lips of Love-Lily,
A spirit is born whose birth endows
My blood with fire to burn through me ; ”
Who breathes upon my gazing eyes,
Who laughs and murmurs in mine ear,
At whose least touch my colour flies,
And whom my life grows faint to hear.

“ Within the voice, within the heart,
Within the mind of Love-Lily,
A spirit is born who lifts apart
His tremulous wings and looks at me ;
Who on my mouth his finger lays,
And shows, while whispering lutes confer,
That Eden of Love’s watered ways
Whose winds and spirits worship her.

“ Brows, hands, and lips, heart, mind, and voice,
Kisses and words of Love-Lily,—
Oh ! bid me with your joy rejoice
Till riotous longing rest in me !
Ah ! let not hope be still distraught,
But find in her its gracious goal,
Whose speech Truth knows not from her thought,
Nor Love her body from her soul.”

With the exception of the usual “ riotous longing,” which seems to make Mr. Rossetti a burden to himself, there is nothing to find fault with in the extreme fleshliness of these verses, and to many people they may even appear beautiful. Without pausing to criticize a thing so trifling—as well might we dissect a cobweb or anatomize a medusa—let me ask the reader’s attention to a peculiarity to which all the students of the Fleshly School must sooner or later give their attention—I mean the habit of accenting the last syl-

lable in words which in ordinary speech are accented on the penultimate :—

“Between the hands, between the brows,
Between the lips of Love-Lilee !”

which may be said to give to the speaker's voice a sort of cooing tenderness just bordering on a loving whistle. Still better as an illustration are the lines :—

“Saturday night is market night
Everywhere, be it dry or wet,
And market night in the Haymar-ket !”

which the reader may advantageously compare with Mr. Morris's

“Then said the king,
Thanked be thou ; *neither for nothing*
Shalt thou this good deed do to me ;”

or Mr. Swinburne's

“In either of the twain
Red roses full of rain ;
She hath for bondwomen
All kinds of flowers.”

It is unnecessary to multiply examples of an affectation which disfigures all these writers ; who, in the same spirit which prompts the ambitious nobodies that rent London theatres in the “empty” season to make up for their dulness by fearfully original “new readings,” distinguish their attempt at leading business by affecting the construction of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, and the accentuation of the poets of the court of James I. It is in all respects a sign of remarkable genius, from this point of view, to rhyme “was” with “grass,” “death” with “lieth,” “gain” with “fountain,” “love” with “of,” “once” with “suns,” and so on *ad nauseam*. I am far from disputing the value of

bad rhymes used occasionally to break up the monotony of verse, but the case is hard when such blunders become the rule and not the exception, when writers deliberately lay themselves out to be as archaic and affected as possible. Poetry is perfect human speech, and these archaisms are the mere fiddlededeeing of empty heads and hollow hearts. Bad as they are, they are the true indication of falser tricks and affectations which lie far deeper. They are trifles light as air, showing how the wind blows. The soul's speech and the heart's speech are clear, simple, natural, and beautiful, and reject the meretricious tricks to which we have drawn attention.

It is on the score that these tricks and affectations have procured the professors a number of imitators, that the small writers of the Fleshly School deliver their formula that great poets are always to be known, because their manner is immediately reproduced by small poets, and that a poet who finds few imitators is probably of inferior rank—by which they mean to infer that they themselves are very great poets indeed. It is quite true that they are imitated. On the stage, twenty provincial “stars” copy Charles Kean, while not one copies his father; there are dozens of actors who reproduce Mr. Charles Dillon, and not one who attempts to reproduce Macready.

But what is really most droll and puzzling in the matter is, that these imitators seem to have no difficulty whatever in writing nearly, if not quite, as well as their masters. It is not bad imitation they offer us, but poems which read just like the originals; the fact being that it is easy to reproduce sound when it has no strict connection with sense, and simple enough to cull phraseology not hope-

lessly interwoven with thought and spirit. The fact that these gentlemen are so easily imitated is the most damning proof of their inferiority. What merits they have lie with their faults on the surface, and can be caught by any young gentleman as easily as the measles, only they are rather more difficult to get rid of. All young gentlemen have animal faculties, though few have brains; and if animal faculties without brains will make poems, nothing is easier in the world. A great and good poet, however, is great and good irrespective of manner, and often in spite of manner; he is great because he brings great ideas and new light, because his thought is a revelation; and, although it is true that a great manner generally accompanies great matter, the manner of great matter is almost inimitable. The great poet is not Cowley, imitated and idolized and reproduced by every scribbler of his time; nor Pope, whose trick of style was so easily copied that to this day we cannot trace his own hand with any certainty in the *Iliad*; nor Donne, nor Sylvester, nor the Della Cruscans. Shakspeare's blank verse is the most difficult and Jonson's the most easy to imitate of all the Elizabethan stock; and Shakspeare's verse is the best verse, because it combines the great qualities of all contemporary verse, with no individual affectations: and so perfectly does this verse, with all its splendour, intersect with the style of contemporaries *at their best*, that we would undertake to select passage after passage which would puzzle a good judge to tell which of the Elizabethans was the author—Marlowe, Beaumont, Dekker, Marston, Webster, or Shakspeare himself. The great poet is Dante, full of the thunder of a great Idea; and Milton, unapproachable in the serene white light of thought and sumptuous wealth of

style; and Shakspeare, all poets by turns, and all men in succession; and Goethe, always innovating, and ever indifferent to innovation for its own sake; and Wordsworth, clear as crystal and deep as the sea; and Tennyson, with his vivid range, far-piercing sight, and perfect speech; and Browning, great, not by virtue of his eccentricities, but because of his close intellectual grasp. Tell "Paradise Lost," the "Divine Comedy," in naked prose; do the same by *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*; read Mr. Hayward's translation of "Faust;" take up the "Excursion," a great poem, though its speech is nearly prose already; turn the "Guinevere" into a mere story; reproduce Pompilia's last dying speech without a line of rhythm. Reduced to bald English, all these poems, and all great poems, lose much; but how much do they not retain? They are poems to the very roots and depths of being, poems born in and delivered from the soul, and treat them as cruelly as you may, poems they will remain. So it is with all good and thorough creations, however low in their rank; so it is with the "Ballad on a Wedding" and "Clever Tom Clinch," just as much as with the "Epistle of Karsheesh," or Goethe's torso of "Prometheus;" with Shelley's "Skylark," or Alfred de Musset's "A la Lune," as well as Racine's *Athalie*, Victor Hugo's "Parricide," or Hood's "Last Man." A poem is a poem, first as to the soul, next as to the form. The fleshly persons who wish to create form for its own sake are merely pronouncing their own doom. But *such* form! If the Pre-Raphaelite fervour gains ground, we shall soon have popular songs like this:—

"When winds do roar, and rains do pour,
Hard is the life of the sailor;

He scarcely as he reels can tell
The side-lights from the binnacle;
He looketh on the wild water," &c. :

and so on, till the English speech seems the speech of raving madmen. Of a piece with other affectations is the device of a burden, of which the fleshly persons are very fond for its own sake, quite apart from its relevancy. Thus Mr. Rossetti sings :—

“ Why did you melt your waxen man,
Sister Helen ?
To-day is the third since you began.
The time was long, yet the time ran,
Little brother.
(*O mother, Mary mother,*
Three days to-day between Heaven and Hell.) ”

This burden is repeated, with little or no alteration, through thirty-four verses. About as much to the point is a burden of Mr. Swinburne's, something to the following effect :—

“ We were three maidens in the green corn,
Small red leaves in the mill-water ;
 Fairer maidens were never born,
Apples of gold for the king's daughter.”

Productions of this sort are "silly sooth" in good earnest, though they delight some newspaper critics of the day, and are copied by young gentlemen with animal faculties morbidly developed by too much tobacco and too little exercise. Such indulgence, however, would ruin the strongest poetical constitution; and it unfortunately happens that neither masters nor pupils were naturally very healthy. In such a poem as "Eden Bower" there is not one scrap of imagination, properly so called. It is a clever grotesque in the worst manner of Callot, unredeemed by a gleam of true poetry or humour. No good poet would have wrought

into a poem the absurd tradition about Lilith ; Goethe was content to glance at it merely, with a grim smile, in the great scene in the Brocken. I may remark here that productions of this unnatural and morbid kind are only tolerable when they embody a profound meaning, as do Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" and "Cristabel." Not that we would insult the memory of Coleridge by comparing his exquisitely conscientious work with this affected rubbish about "Eden Bower" and "Sister Helen," although his influence in their composition is unmistakable. Still more unmistakable is the influence of that unwholesome poet, Beddoes, who, with all his great powers (unmistakably superior to those of any of the present Fleshly School), treated his subjects in a thoroughly insincere manner, and is now justly forgotten.

The great strong current of English poetry rolls on, ever mirroring in its bosom new prospects of fair and wholesome thought. Morbid deviations are endless and inevitable ; there must be marsh and stagnant mere as well as mountain and wood. Glancing backward into the shady places of the obscure, we have seen the once prosperous nonsense-writers each now consigned to his own little limbo—Skelton and Gower still playing fantastic tricks with the mother-tongue ; Gascoigne outlasting the applause of all, and living to see his own works buried before him ;* Sylvester doomed to oblivion by his own fame as a translator ; Carew the idol of courts, and Donne the beloved of schoolmen, both buried in the same oblivion ; the fantastic Fletchers winning

* Gascoigne's verse is noticeable, like Mr. Swinburne's, for its laboured and wearisome alliteration ; but the "Good Morrow" and "Good Night" are simple and graceful enough to save his fame from utter shipwreck.

the wonder of collegians, and fading out through sheer poetic impotence; Cowley shaking all England with his pindarics, and perishing with them; Waller, the famous, saved from oblivion by the natural note of one single song*—and so on, through league after league of a flat and desolate country which once was prosperous, till we come again to these fantastic figures of the Fleshly School, with their droll mediæval garments, their funny archaic speech, and the fatal marks of literary consumption on every pale and delicate visage. My judgment on Mr. Rossetti, to whom I in the meantime confine my judgment, is substantially that of the *North American Reviewer*, who believes that “we have in him another poetical man, and a man markedly poetical, and of a kind apparently, though not radically, different from any of our secondary writers of poetry, but that we have not in him a new poet of any weight;” and that he is “so affected, sentimental, and painfully self-conscious, that the best to be done in his case is to hope that this book of his, having unpacked his bosom of so much that is unhealthy, may have done him more good than it has given others pleasure.”† Such, I say, is my opinion, which might very well be wrong, and have to undergo modification, if Mr. Rossetti were younger and less self-possessed. His “maturity” is fatal.

* “Gø, lovely Rose.”

† It is only fair to add that the Reviewer merely gives this as the judgment he was “inclined” to pronounce, only that to say so in as many words might lead to the misconception that Mr. Rossetti had no literary merit whatever.

V.

"THE HOUSE OF LIFE," &c., RE-EXAMINED.

I HAD written thus far of Mr. Rossetti's poems, just after reading them for the first time when cruising among the Western Isles of Scotland in the summer of 1871, and I had published my criticism in the *Contemporary Review* for October (under circumstances explained in my preface), when Mr. Rossetti, goaded into a sense of grievance by the ill-advised sympathy of his friend the editor of the *Athenæum*, "replied" to the audacious critic who, not being honoured by his personal acquaintance, dared to accuse him of poetic incompetence and literary immorality. Mr. Rossetti's letter, forming a whole page and a quarter of his favourite weekly print, now lies before me; and I am bound in honour to consider it in some detail.

After a preamble somewhat personal to myself,* Mr. Rossetti arrives at his first point, which amounts to this—that he is going to write a long article of self-defence to show he is indifferent. He then formally opens his case, and (that he may not hereafter accuse me of "garbling"

* "Here a critical organ, professedly adopting the principle of open signature, would seem, in reality, to assert (by silent practice, however, not by enunciation,) that if the anonymous in criticism was—as itself originally inculcated—but an early caterpillar stage, the nominate too is found to be no better than a homely transitional chrysalis, and that the ultimate butterfly form for a critic who likes to sport in sunlight and yet to elude the grasp, is after all the pseudonymous." Surely human ingenuity never so tortured itself to clothe a simple meaning in cumbrous and affected words! The only parallel is the author's poetry, where a simple kiss becomes a "consonant interlude," and the ink in a love-letter is called "the smooth black stream that makes thy (the letter's) whiteness fair!"

his letter) I will quote his very words, only italicising them in certain places :—

“ The primary accusation, on which this writer grounds all the rest, seems to be that others and myself ‘ extol fleshliness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art ; aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought ; and, by inference, that the body is greater than the soul, and sound superior to sense.’ As my own writings are alone formally dealt with in the article, I shall confine my answer to myself ; and this must first take unavoidably *the form of a challenge to prove* so broad a statement. It is true, some fragmentary pretence at proof is put in here and there throughout the attack, and thus far an opportunity is given of contesting the assertion.

“ A Sonnet, entitled ‘ Nuptial Sleep,’ is quoted and abused at page 338 of the *Review*, and is there dwelt upon as a ‘ whole poem,’ describing ‘ merely animal sensations.’ It is no more a whole poem in reality, than is any single stanza of any poem throughout the book. The poem, written chiefly in sonnets, and of which this is one sonnet-stanza, is entitled ‘ The House of Life ;’ and even in my first published instalment of the whole work (as contained in the volume under notice) ample evidence is included that no such passing phase of description as the one headed ‘ Nuptial Sleep’ could possibly be put forward by the author of ‘ The House of Life’ as his own representative view of the subject of love. In proof of this, I will direct attention (among the love-sonnets of this poem) to Nos. 2, 8, 11, 17, 28, and more especially 13, which, indeed, I had better print here.

LOVE-SWEETNESS.

Sweet dimness of her loosened hair’s downfall
 About thy face ; her *sweet* hands round thy head
 In gracious fostering union garlanded ;
 Her tremulous smiles ; her glances’ *sweet* recall
 Of love ; her murmuring sighs memorial ;
Her mouth’s culled sweetness by thy kisses shed
On cheeks and neck and eyelids, and so led
Back to her mouth which answers there for all :—
 What *sweeter* than these things, except the thing
 In lacking which all these would lose their *sweet* :—
 The confident heart’s still fervour ; the swift beat
 And soft subsidence of the spirit’s wing,
 Then when it feels, in cloud-girt wayfaring,
 The breath of kindred plumes against its feet !

"Any reader may bring any artistic charge he pleases against the above sonnet; but one charge it would be impossible to maintain against the writer of the series in which it occurs, and that is, the wish on his part to assert that the body is greater than the soul. For here *all the passionate and just delights of the body are declared—somewhat figuratively, it is true, but unmistakably—to be as naught if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times.* (!)* Moreover, nearly one half of this series of sonnets has nothing to do with love, but treats of quite other life-influences. I would defy any one to couple with fair quotation of Sonnets 29, 30, 31, 39, 40, 41, 43, or others, the slander that their author was not impressed, like all other thinking men, with the responsibilities and higher mysteries of life; while Sonnets 35, 36, and 37, entitled 'The Choice,' sum up the general view taken in a manner only to be evaded by conscious insincerity. Thus much for 'The House of Life,' of which the Sonnet 'Nuptial Sleep' is one stanza, *embodying, for its small constituent share, a beauty of natural universal function, only to be reprobated in art if dwelt on (as I have shown that it is not here) to the exclusion of those other highest things of which it is the harmonious concomitant.*"†

Thus far Mr. Rossetti; and although it is rather hard to have to refer again to poems so unsavoury, I have no option but to accept the challenge, and judge Mr. Rossetti by "The House of Life" as an uncompleted whole. A reference to this poem, so far from changing my opinion, makes me wonder at the writer's misconception of its true character. It is flooded with sensualism from the first line to the last; it is a very hotbed of nasty phrases; but its nastiness—or its unwholesomeness—goes far deeper than any phraseology. It opens with a sonnet entitled "Bridal Love," wherein we are told that "Love,"

"Born with her life, creature of poignant thirst
And exquisite hunger,"

* My complaint precisely is, that Mr. Rossetti's "soul" *concurs* a vast deal too easily.

† The italics are mine.—R. B.

is preparing "with his warm hands our couch;" and so intense grows the poet's enthusiasm at this information that he exclaims, wildly addressing his lady in Sonnet II.,—

" O thou who at Love's hour ecstasically
Unto my lips dost evermore present
The body and blood of Love in Sacrament !"

—which is a pretty good beginning, quite apart from the blasphemy, for a writer in whose eyes a "beauty of natural universal function" is merely a "harmonious concomitant" of higher things. Sonnet III., entitled "Love's Light," describes harmlessly enough how,

" —in the dark hours (we two alone)
Close kissed and eloquent of still replies
Thy twilight-hidden glimmering visage lies ; "

but in Sonnet IV. another and higher stage is reached, for the lady gives her lover a "consonant interlude" (which is the Fleshly for "kiss"), and—"somewhat figuratively, it is true, but unmistakably"—proceeds, as a mother suckles a baby, to afford him full fruition :—

" I was a child beneath her touch (!),—a man
When *breast to breast we clung*, even I and she,—
A spirit when her spirit lookt thro' me,—
A god when *all our life-breath met to fan*
Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,
Fire within fire, desire in deity."

O malignant critic, who has dared to attain the author of these sweet lines of "fleshliness !" Let the reader examine this passage phrase by phrase and word by word, dwelling particularly on the descriptive animalism of the last three lines. Why, much the same charge might be brought against that delicious effort of Thomas Carew, entitled "The Rapture,"

wherein (quite after the modern fleshly style) the whole business of love is chronicled in sublime and daring metaphor :—

“Then will I visit with a wandering kiss
The bower of roses and the grove of bliss,
Thence, passing o’er thy snowy Appenine,
Retire into thy grove of eglantine.” *

Sonnet V. is our favourite already quoted, “Nuptial Sleep,” and Sonnet VI., or “Supreme Surrender,” tells us how—

“To all the spirits of love that wander by,
Along the love-sown fallow field of sleep
My lady lies apparent ; and the deep
Calls to the deep ; and no one sees but I.”

There is also this dainty touch about her hand :—

“First touched, the hand now warm around my neck
Taught memory long to mock desire.”

Sonnet VII., “Love’s Lovers,” is meaningless, but in the best manner of Carew and Dr. Donne ; and the same may be said of Sonnet VIII., “Passion and Worship.” Sonnet IX., “The Portrait,” is a good sonnet and good poetry, despite the epithets of “mouth’s mould” and “long lithe throat.” Sonnet X., the “Love Letter,” is fleshly and affected, but stops short of nastiness. Sonnet XI. is also innocuous. Sonnets XII. to XX. are one profuse sweat of animalism, containing, amongst other gems, this euphuistic description of a kissing match :—

“Her mouth’s culled sweetness by thy kisses shed
On cheeks, and neck, and eyelids, and so led
Back to her mouth which answers there for all ;”

* For a production quite in our modern manner, the reader had better refer to this extraordinary poem. I dare not quote another word.

and scores of the author's pet phrases, the veriest pimples on the surface of style, like "wanton flowers," "murmuring sighs memorial," "sweet confederate music favourable," "hours eventual," "Love's philtred euphrasy," "culminant changes"—all familiar enough to us from the Della Cruscans; but culminating, in Sonnet XX., with an image in which the Euphuist would have rejoiced:—

"Her set gaze gathered, thirstier than of late, (!)
And as she kissed, her *Mouth became her Soul!*"

In Sonnet XXI., called "Parted Love," the lady has retired to get breath and arrange her clothes, and the lover is despairingly waiting from "the stark noon-height" to the "sunset's desolate disarray." Sonnets XXII. and XXIII. are too vague for description, but Landor would have stared to see his famous sea-shell image (which he accused Wordsworth of stealing) turned by the euphuistic-fleshy person into

"The speech-bound sea-shell's low *importunate strain.*"

The next four sonnets, called by the affected title of "Willow-wood," contain, besides the gem about "bubbling of brimming kisses," some fresh variations of a kiss:—

"Fast together, alive from the abyss,
Clung the *soul-wrung implacable close kiss.*"

An "implacable" kiss! Also:—

"So when the song died *did the kiss uncloze,*
And her face fell back drown'd."

The supreme silliness and worthlessness of "Willow-wood," however, could only be shown by quoting the four sonnets

entire. Sonnet XXVIII., or "Still-born Love," will doubtless suggest to Mr. Rossetti's admirers other similar themes, and we shall speedily have poetry on "Love's Cross-birth" and "Love's Anæsthetics." Sonnets XXIX., XXX., and XXXI., Mr. Rossetti particularly challenges me to impeach; and I may at once admit that they are not nasty, though very, very silly. In Sonnet XXXII., however, we get back to the old imagery:—

"Even as the thistledown from pathsides dead
Glean'd by a girl in autumns of her youth,
Which one new year makes soft her marriage bed."

Mr. Rossetti is never so great as on "kisses" and "beds." In spite of euphuisms without end, we get nothing very spicy till we come to Sonnet XXXIX., one of those which Mr. Rossetti calls immaculate. Here, not content with picturing "Vain Virtues" as Virgins writhing in Hell, he describes the Fire as the Bridegroom, and pursues the metaphor to the very pit of beastliness:—

"Virgins . . . whom the fiends compel
Together now, in snake-bound shuddering sheaves
Of anguish, while *the scorching Bridegroom leaves*
Their refuse maidenhood (!) abominable !"

There are ten sonnets to come, but *must* I quote from them? Surely I have quoted already *ad nauseam*. After the sonnets comes "Love-Lily," which I have already given in full; then "First Love Remembered;" then "Plighted Promise," a lyric which I am bound to copy, as it has never been equalled since the famous

"Fluttering fold thy feeble pinions"

of the "Rejected Addresses:"—

"PLIGHTED PROMISE.

" In a soft-complexioned sky
 Fleeting rose and kindling grey,
 Have you seen *Aurora* fly
 At the break of day ?
 So my maiden, so my plighted may
 Blushing cheek and gleaming eye
 Lifts to look my way.

" Where the inmost leaf is stirred
 With the heart-beat of the grove,
 Have you heard a hidden bird
 Cast her note above ?
 So my lady, so my lovely love
 Echoing *Cupid's* prompted word,
 Makes a tune thereof.

" Have you seen, at heaven's mid-height,
 In the moon-rack's ebb and tide,
 Venus leap forth burning white
 Pearl-pale and hide ?
 So my bright breast-jewel, so my bride
 One sweet night when fear takes flight
 Shall leap against my side."

A "soft-complexioned sky!" the "heart-beat of the grove!" "Aurora, Cupid, Dian!" I rub my eyes, wondering if this can be the nineteenth century, till the last lines, with their "bright breast-jewel," recall me to my subject. But really quotations of this sort become the merest iteration. "The House of Life" contains eight songs more. Four of them, though sensuous in the extreme, have no direct reference to nasty subjects. The other four are sickly love-poems, swarming with affectations. My extracts, however, must close with this verse from the "Song of the Bower" (Mr. Rossetti is great in "bowers") :—

" What were my prize, could I enter thy bower,
 This day, to-morrow, at eve or at morn ?

*Large lovely arms and a neck like a tower,**
 Bosom then heaving that now lies forlorn,

Kindled with love-breath, (the sun's kiss is colder !)
 Thy sweetness all near me, so distant to-day ;
 My hand round thy neck and thy hand on my shoulder,
My mouth to thy mouth as the world melts away."

In this and a thousand other passages one thing is apparent : either Mr. Rossetti is stealing wholesale from Mr. Swinburne, or Mr. Swinburne has been all his life robbing Mr. Rossetti.

Having so far complied with Mr. Rossetti's request, and re-examined "The House of Life," I retain unchanged my impression that the sort of house meant should be nameless, but is probably the identical one where the writer found "Jenny." Once more, I should like to quote Mr. Rossetti, in the further passages of his high argument ; but he is so very abusive that I am bound to condense his statement. After vindicating "The House of Life," he proceeds to say that the four extracts given in p. 44 are grossly garbled, and printed "without reference to any precise page or poem," and that the poems themselves, if read wisely, would be found perfectly beautiful and artistic. Turn, then, to the four poems in question. The first is "A Last Confession," which describes, in Mr. Browning's favourite manner, how an Italian, maddened by jealousy, murdered his mistress. This Italian, it may be remarked, is very like our author, for, besides being disagreeably affected, he had a morbid habit of *brooding* over unclean ideas and suspicions ; inso-

* Compare Greene's "Menaphon's Eclogue :"—

"Her neck like to an ivory shining tower," &c.

much that, as Mr. Rossetti truly observes, he is driven to frenzy by the real or fancied resemblance between the laugh of the harlot and that of his mistress. "Observe also," continues the bard, "that these are but seven lines in a poem of five hundred, not one other of which could be classed with them." Observe, I say in turn, that the whole poem is morbid and unwholesome, and must be drunk in as a whole to leave its full bad flavour. It positively reeks of murder, madness, and morbid lust, and whatever merit it possesses lies in the intensity of its ugly thoughts, from the first moment when the Italian began his courtship in this extraordinary fashion—

"What I knew I told
Of Venus and of Cupid,—strange old tales!"

—till, blinded with lustful rage, he confesses having murdered her, and tells his dreams:—

"She wrung her hair out in my dream
To-night, till all the darkness *reeked* of it.
I heard the blood between her fingers *hiss*!"

In justice we should observe that a madman is speaking; but this madman has Mr. Rossetti's gift, for here is the sort of conceit with which he delights the priest:—

"She had a mouth
Made to bring death to life,—*the underlip*
Suck'd in, as if it strove to kiss itself."

With the Della Cruscan, the attempt to seem subtle and striking becomes a positive mania. What would be said of a poet who wrote thus?—

Her nose inclined to heaven,
As if it tried to turn up at itself!

Yet the one metaphor is every whit as sensible and brilliant as the other.

The second of the four poems is the "bubble" poem from "The House of Life." The third is from "Eden Bower," a production which I would gladly quote entire. "Here again," it is observed, "no reference is given, and naturally the reader would suppose that a *human* embrace is described. The embrace, on the contrary, is that of a fabled snake-woman and a snake." Exactly; but will Mr. Rossetti describe a single passage in his poems where a human embrace *is* described? The lovers of the Fleshly School are invariably snake-like in their eternal wriggling, lipping, munching, slaving, and biting; and indeed, on reflection, "Eden Bower" may be fairly considered as a complete epitome of the art of love as practised by the coterie poets. Since Mr. Rossetti is dissatisfied, let us try again. His book is a lottery-bag—we draw blindfold—but are always sure of a prize:—

"Bring thou close thine head *till it glisten*
Along my breast, and lip me, and listen!"

Once more,—conjugal bliss of Adam and Lilith:—

"What great joys had Adam and Lilith!
Sweet close rings of the serpent's twining,
As heart in heart lay sighing and pining."*

The result (next verse):—

"What *bright babes* had Lilith and Adam?
Shapes that coiled in the woods and waters," &c.

All this is savoury, and the whole poem is still more so; so

* Compare Carew:—

"Now in more subtle wreaths I will entwine
My sturdy limbs, my legs and thighs, with thine!"

that the reader feels a horrible sense of sliminess, as if he were handling a yellow serpent or a conger eel. Let me try blindfold once more for another "draw." This time my prize is from "Troy Town;" but, before I quote, let me once more premise that the poem as a whole is fleshier and sillier than any extract. Helen's breasts, described by herself :—

“ Each twin breast is an apple sweet !

✱ ✱ ✱ ✱

Mine are apples grown to the south

(*O Troy Town!*)

Grown to taste in the days of drouth,

Taste and waste to the heart's desire ;

Mine are apples *meet for his mouth !* "

So that Paris, poor fellow, has a fair prospect of being *suckled* by Helen, and is likely, after "tasting" her "apples" or "breasts meet for his mouth," to "waste" them (whatever that means) "to his heart's desire."

But already I hear the amazed reader cry, with Macbeth, "Hold, enough !" I have thus piled example upon example, all out of one small volume of verse ; and I might readily go on quoting for pages more. I reject altogether the insinuation that my criticism was based on private grounds. I do not know Mr. Rossetti, have no grievance against him, and I can quite believe that in private life he is a most exemplary person ; but in his poetry—to go no further at present than that very small phase of a portentous phenomenon—there is a veritably stupendous preponderance of sensuality and sickly animalism. I base that belief, not merely on stray expressions such as I quoted, not merely on lines about the "lipping of limbs," bubbling of kisses, "fawning of lips" in bed, munching of mouths, and

all the inordinate coarseness of the fleshly vocabulary, but on the persistent choice of subjects repulsive in themselves, and capable of fleshly treatment, such as the lyric about Jenny the street-walker, who "advertises dainties through the dirt," and is serenaded by the poet in a brothel; the poem about Lilith the Snake, and her gripping and lipping, and general arts of fornication; and the nuptial sonnet which Mr. Rossetti studiously refrains from quoting, knowing that it would condemn him fatally in all decent eyes. I said, and I say, that the very choice of these subjects is deplorable, and that their treatment is offensive; and I said, and say, that the morbid habit penetrates into the writer's treatment even when, as very seldom happens, he chooses a subject by no means morbid in itself: all this without going beyond Mr. Rossetti; but if I go a little further, and look at that phenomenon of which he is a phase, I find decency outraged, history falsified, purity sacrificed, art prostituted, language perverted, religion outraged, in one gibbering attempt to apotheosize vice and demolish art with the implements of blasphemy and passion; I find that Mary of Scotland is a biting and scratching harlot, Sappho a lustful wild beast, Christ and Christianity scandals and abortions; and pursuing further my inquiry into this phenomenon, finding religion distorted into lust, and lust raving in the very language of religion, I take occasion to say—on public grounds only, with no grudge, with no personal animosity whatever—that a number of men of real though very limited ability are, blinded by their own little knowledge, the praise of vile minds, and the applause of a heartless clique, rushing headlong to literary ruin, and dragging many of the young generation

with them. What Mr. Rossetti says in explanation is only to the point in so far as it is deplorably convincing that he himself is utterly unconscious of his own offences ; does not, in fact, discriminate between passion and sensuality ; and endeavours, writhing under what he thinks an unmerited imputation, to save himself on the plea of personal purity and dramatic motive. No one can rejoice more than I do to hear that Mr. Rossetti attaches a certain importance to the soul as distinguished from the body, only I should like very much to know what he means by the soul ; for I fear, from the sonnet he quotes, that he regards the feeling for a young woman's person, face, heart, and mind, as in itself quite a spiritual sentiment. In the poem entitled "Love-Lily" he expressly observes that Love cannot tell Lily's "body from her soul"—they are so inextricably blended. It is precisely this confusion of the two which, filling Mr. Rossetti as it eternally does with what he calls "riotous longing," becomes so intolerable to readers with a less mystic sense of animal function.

VI.

PEARLS FROM THE AMATORY POETS.

"Belial came last, than whom a spirit more lewd
Fell not from heaven, or more gross to love
Vice for itself."

Paradise Lost.

I HAVE thus carefully gone through Mr. Rossetti's poetry, not because it is by any means the best or worst verse of its kind, but because, being avowedly "mature," and having had the benefit of many years' revision, it is perhaps more

truly representative of its class than the grosser verse of Mr. Swinburne, or the more careless and fluent verse of Mr. Morris. The main charge I bring against poetry of this kind is its sickliness and effeminacy; but if there be any truth in my own Theory of Literary Morality, as enunciated some years ago in the *Fortnightly Review*, the charge of indecency need not be pressed at all, as it is settled by the fact of artistic and poetic incompetence. The morality of any book is determinable by its value as literature—immoral writing proceeding primarily from insincerity of vision, and therefore being betokened by all those signs which enable us to ascertain the value of art as art. In the present case the matter is ludicrously simple; for we perceive that the silliness and the insincerity come, not by nature, but at second hand; Mr. Rossetti and Mr. Swinburne being the merest echoes—strikingly original in this—that they merely echo what is vile, while other imitators reproduce what is admirable. I am loath in this connection to incriminate Mr. Morris. That gentleman is so prolific, so fertile in resources, and is generally so innocent (despite the ever-present *undertone* of fleshliness), that he may fairly be left to his laurels. He is open to the same *literary* criticism as the others, but, while often ingenuous, is never altogether unclean.

It may be interesting for the reader to compare, in a brief glance, the various poets of the Italian-English school with each other. To do so thoroughly would involve the serious task of perusing three-fourths of the forgotten English poets; for, since weeds ever grew quicker than flowers, the bulk of the poetic trash left behind by successive generations of verse-writers, from Surrey to Spratt, far outweighs the little

collection of true poetry which may justly be esteemed classic and unimpeachable. But it may be observed here that all the poets of this school, though their name be legion, write very much alike. They are generally affected, and often nasty. "All that regards design, form, fable (which is the soul of poetry), all that concerns exactness or consent of parts (which is the body), will probably be wanting: only pretty conceptions, fine metaphors, glittering expressions, and something of a neat cast of verse (which are properly the dress, gems, or loose ornaments of poetry), may be found in their verses. Their colouring entertains the sight, but the lines and life are not to be inspected too narrowly." Such is Pope's criticism on Crashaw, and it will apply to any one of the school, certainly to Mr. Swinburne or Mr. Rossetti.

It need cause no wonder that verse-writers of this sort find admirers in proportion to their shallowness and affectation. This has been the case from the beginning, and it is the case now. The poems and plays of the egregious Cartwright, published in 1651, are preceded by panegyrics from all the wits of the time, no less than fifty in number, quite in the style of the Fleshly School and its Critics. Donne was the pride of collegians. Cowley was actually considered the glory and the wonder of his generation. Nowadays the anonymous press is a tremendous check on this sort of humbug, but there still linger old-fashioned journals with strings in the hands of a clique.* It is the *interest* of educated persons and schoolmen to exalt all artificial products, for they themselves can fairly hope to rival the stuff they praise and to get some sort of a position. If hothouse plants are in

* See Notes.

favour, any clever young fellow from a university can force them. And it thus happens that the Fleshly School, without ever reaching the general public, is in favour with the literary amateurs who yearly swarm from college, and ruin the profession of literature by writing anywhere and everywhere free of charge.

From time immemorial, poets of the Artificial School have written in the same way, and been admired for the same tricks; and indeed our modern poets can stand no comparison, even in subtle grossness, with their progenitors. Here are Cowley's lines on a paper written in juice of lemon, and read by the fire :—

“ Nothing yet in thee is seen ;
 But when a genial heat warms thee within,
 A new-born wood of various lines there grows,
 Here buds an L, and there a B,
 Here spouts a V, and there a T,
 And all the flourishing letters stand in rows ;”

which the reader may advantageously compare with Mr. Rossetti's description of a love-letter in p. 198 of his volume. The master above quoted, in his “ Davideis,” has the following awful passage :—

“ The sun himself started with sudden fright,
 To see his beams return so dismal light !”

This is performing a miracle certainly, but Mr. Rossetti performs a greater—he makes the “ Silence ” *speak* :—

“ But therewithal the tremulous Silence said :
 ‘ Lo, Love yet bids thy lady,’ ” &c. (Page 206.)

Thus sings, or screams, Mr. Swinburne :—

“ Ah, that my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed .
 To the bruised blossom of thy scotured white breast !
 Ah, that my mouth, for Muses' milk, were fed
 On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled !

That with my tongue I felt them and could taste
 The faint flakes from thy bosom to the waist !
 That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
 Thy breasts like honey."

Dr. Donne, however, had anticipated him in the same vein :—

" As the sweet sweat of roses in a still,
 As that, which from chaf'd muskats' pores doth trill,
 As the almighty balm of the early east,
 Such are the sweat drops of my mistress' breast ;
 And on her neck her skin such lustre sets,
 They seem no sweat drops, but pearl coronets."

These poets ever delight in the strangest and most far-fetched comparisons. Cleveland has a magnificent comparison of the sun to a *coal-pit* ; but Rossetti, twenty times more cunning and subtle, sees that " vows " are the merest *bricks* :—

" We strove
 To *build* with *fire-tried vows* the piteous home
 Which memory haunts." (Page 208.)

Cowley compares his heart to a hand-grenado ; in a similar spirit, Rossetti compares the Soul to a town, and (bent to hunt the simile to death) tells us that there are by-streets there, and that Hopes go about hunting for adventures at the public-houses !—

" So through that soul in restless brotherhood,
 They roam together now, and *wind among*
It's bye-streets, knocking at the dusty inns!" (Page 231.)

Dr. John Donne is great on Tears : they are at one time " globes, nay worlds," containing their " Europe, Asia, and Africa ;" and at another they are " wine," bottled " in crystal vials" for the tipples of lovers. Mr. Rossetti, in a semi-military spirit, thus describes a Moan :—

" A moan, the sighing wind's *auxiliary!*"

Quite in the spirit of Mr. Rossetti's fleshlier and commoner manner, in which he talks about his lady's hand teaching "memory to mock desire," is Cowley's exquisite meditation, addressed to his mistress:—

"Though in thy thoughts scarce any tracts have been
 So much as of original sin,
 Such charms thy beauty wears, as might
 Desires in dying saints excite!"

This is the way Dr. John Donne writes in the beginning of the seventeenth century:—

"Are not thy kisses, then, as filthy, and more,
 As a worm sucking an envenom'd sore?
 Doth not thy fearful hand in feeling quake,
 As one which gathering flowers still fears a snake?"

Could anything more closely resemble the horrible manner of Mr. Swinburne's "Anactoria?"

It is difficult to believe that our present school of poets have not drunk deep at the muddy Aganippe of their predecessors here in England, as well as at the poetic fountain polluted by the influx of the Parisian sewers. There is a coincidence of affectation in the following parallel passages:—

THE TROJAN HORSE.

"A *mother*, I was without *mother* born,
 In end, all arm'd, my *father* I brought forth!"—DRUMMOND.

"That horse, within whose populous womb
 The *birth* was *death*."—ROSSETTI (p. 229).

Again, Mr. Rossetti, in Sonnet XXIX., compares LIFE to "a LADY" with whom he wandered from the "haunts of men," finding "all bowers amiss" (!) till he came to a place

“where only woods and waves could hear our kiss,” and who, as an awful result, bare him three children, Love, Song—

“Whose hair
Blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath,
And Art, *whose eyes were worlds by God found fair.*” *

Nearly as absurd, but less subtle and harassing, is the passage in Drummond’s “Hymn to the Fairest Fair,” wherein we have the following incarnate metaphor of no less shadowy a shape than “Providence!”—

“With faces two, like sisters, sweetly fair,
Whose blossoms no rough autumn can impair,
Stands Providence, and doth her looks disperse
Thro’ every corner of the universe.”

Nor must it be hastily concluded that Mr. Rossetti’s “apples meet for the mouth” simile is quite original. Drummond in one passage calls his mistresses’ hearts

“Fruits of Paradise,
Celestial cherries that so sweetly smell;”

and in another—the following sonnet—comes tremendously close upon the *best* modern manner, minus the “lipping” and the “munching:”—

“Who hath not seen into her saffron bed
The morning’s goddess mildly her repose,
Or her of whose pure blood first sprang the rose
Lull’d in a slumber by a myrtle shade?
Who hath not seen that sleeping white and red
Makes Phoebe look so pale, which she did close
In that Ionian hall to ease her woes,
Which only lives by her dear kisses fed?
Come but and see my lady sweetly sleep,

* It is perhaps needless to remark the utter confusion of metaphor which makes a *love-act* with Life as Lady precede the *birth* of Love, &c. The language of this school will not bear a moment’s serious investigation.

The sighing rubies of those heavenly lips,
The Cupids which breasts' golden apples keep,
 Those eyes which shine in midst of their eclipse;
 And he them all shall see, perhaps and prove
 She waking but persuadeth, now forceth love."

I have quoted this poem entire, because it is quite in the modern spirit, and would certainly, if printed in either Mr. Swinburne's or Mr. Rossetti's poems, have been considered beautiful; and partly because I should like the reader to compare it with the Swinburnian conception of "Love and Sleep, as known to the moderns:"—

"Lying asleep between the strokes of night
 I saw my love lean over my sad bed,
 Pale as the duskiest lily's leaf or head,
 Smooth-skinned and dark with bare *throat made to bite!*
 Too wan for blushing and too warm for white,
 But perfect coloured without white or red;
 And her lips opened amorously, and said—
 I wist not what, saving one word—Delight!
 And all her face was honey to my mouth,
 And all her body pasture to mine eyes;
 The long lithe arms and hotter hands than fire,
 The *quivering flanks*, hair smelling of the south,
 The bright light feet, the *splendid supple thighs*,
 And *glittering eyelids of my soul's desire.*"

SWINBURNE'S *Poems and Ballads*, p. 316.

The reader whom this fascinates had better turn to Dr. Donne's eighteenth elegy, every line of which might have been written in our generation, wherein the nude female is compared to a Globe for the lover's exploration, and the whole Voyage is described with a terrific realism of detail and daring strength of metaphor which would fill even Mr. Rossetti with envy and despair. It is, unfortunately, rather too strong to quote, though not a grain more filthy than the above sonnet. Let me turn, by way of disinfectant, to a

conceit in the true Della Cruscan style, from Mr. Rossetti's works. A very shadowy Entity is speaking, in a poem affectedly called "A Superscription :"—

"Look in my face : my name is *Might-have-been* ;
I am also called *No-more, Too-late, Farewell* ;
Unto thine ear I hold the dead sea-shell," &c. (Page 234.)

This passage, although quite in the ancient manner, was perhaps composed on one of those days when Mr. Rossetti goes poaching in Mr. Swinburne's French "Slough of Uncleanness," for we find Baudelaire making use of very similar language :—

"Trois mille six cents fois par heure, la Seconde
Chuchote : *Souviens-toi ! Rapide avec sa voix*
D'insecte, *Maintenant* dit : Je suis *Autrefois !*"
Fleurs de Mal, p. 245.

Truly, this sort of reading is wearing to the brain !

I have already alluded more than once to the foolish fleshliness which permeates the contemporary treatment of even avowedly *religious* themes. For example, when Mr. Rossetti writes about the Virgin Mary, he begins in the true fantastic spirit of those older writers who spiritualised sensualism in their addresses to the Bridegroom and the Magdalen.

"Mother of the Fair Delight !"

he exclaims ; and then proceeds with the following jargon :—

"Handmaid perfect in God's sight,
Now sitting fourth beside the Three,
Thyself a woman-Trinity,—
Being a daughter born to God,
Mother of Christ from stall to rood,
And Wife unto the Holy Ghost ! !"

The poem improves as it proceeds, but it is fleshly to the

last fibre,—quite, in fact, in the spirit of Richard Crashaw's poem on "The Weeper :"—

" What bright soft thing is this ?
Sweet Mary, thy fair eyes' expence ?
A moist spark it is,
A watery diamond ; from whence
The very term, I think, was found,
The water of a diamond.

" O 'tis not a tear,
'Tis a star about to drop
From thine eye its sphere ;
The sun will stoop and take it up,
Proud will his sister be to wear
This thine eye's jewel in her ear.

" O 'tis a tear,
Too true a tear ! for no sad eyne,
How sad so e'er,
Rain so true a tear as thine ;
Each drop leaving a place so dear
Weeps for itself, is its own tear.

" Such a pearl as this is
(Slipt from Aurora's dewy breast)
The rose-bud's sweet lip kisses,
And such the rose itself when vex'd
With ungentle flames, does shed,
Sweating in too warm a bed."

This is *meant* reverently, but what shall we say of Mr. Rossetti's "*Love's Redemption*," in which the act of sexual connection is outrageously and vilely compared to the administering of the sacramental bread and wine ?—

" O thou, who at Love's hour ecstatically," &c.*

Compare, also, with Mr. Rossetti's pseudo-religious poems generally, those passages of Crashaw in which all the language of passion and lust is used to describe purely spiritual and religious sensations :—

* See *ante*, p. 59.

“ Amorous languishments, luminous trances,
 Sights which are not seen with eyes,
 Spiritual and soul-piercing glances ;
 Whose pure and subtle lightning flies
 Home to the heart, and sets the house on fire ;
 And melts it down in sweet desire :
 Yet doth not stay
 To ask the windows leave to pass that way.

“ Delicious deaths, soft exhalations
 Of soul ! dear and divine annihilations !
 A thousand unknown rites
 Of joys and rarified delights ! ”

On a Prayer Book sent to Mrs. M. R.

This might have been pardonable in a Roman Catholic of Selden's time, but the echo of it in a “ mature ” person of the nineteenth century is positively dreadful.*

I close this book of the “ mature ” person. I close Mr. Swinburne's volumes. I try to gather some definite impression, some thought, some light, from what I have been reading. I find my mind jaded, my whole body sick and distressed, a dull pain lurking in the region of the *medulla oblongata*. I try to picture up Mr. Rossetti's poetry, and I am dazzled by conceits in sixteenth-century costume,—“ rosy

* Hall, in the ninth satire of Book I., took occasion to attack this blending of incongruous ideas and symbols into affected religious verse. “ Hence, ye profane ! ” he cried,

“ —mell not with holy things,
 That Sion's Muse from Palestina brings.
 Parnassus is transformed to Sion Hill,
 And iv'ry-palms her steep ascents done fill,
 Now good St. Peter weeps pure Helicon,
 And both the Maries make a music moan ;
 Yea, even the prophet of the heav'nly lyre,
 Great Solomon, sings in the English quire,
 And is become a new-found sonnetist,
 Singing his love, the holy spouse of Christ,
 Like as she were some light-skirts of the rest,” &c.

hours," " Loves " with " gonfalons," damsels with " citherns," " soft-complexioned " skies ; flowers, fruits, jewels, vases, apple-blossoms, lutes : I see no gleam of nature, not a sign of humanity ; I hear only the heated ravings of an affected lover, indecent for the most part, and often blasphemous. I attempt to describe Mr. Swinburne ; and lo ! the Bacchanal screams, the sterile Dolores sweats, serpents dance, men and women wrench, wriggle, and foam in an endless alliteration (quite in Gascoigne's manner) of heated and meaningless words, the veriest garbage of Baudelaire flowered over with the epithets of the Della Cruscans.

" One moment ! " observes a candid person as I write ; " the emptiness and grossness of these may be admitted ; but are not these writers quite unimpeachable on the ground of poetic *form*, and is that not a certain merit ? " Something on this head has been said already. Let it be further said that no unsound soul is clad in a sound form ; and that what holds true of matter and thought holds equally true of manner and style : both may seem rapid and strong, but neither will bear five minutes' criticism. Imagine an English writer pluming himself on his careful choice of diction, and publishing such a verse as the following :—

" Nothing is better, I *well* think,
Than love ; the hidden *well-water*
Is not so delicate to drink :
This was *well* seen of me and her."

SWINBURNE'S *Poems and Ballads*.

Or this other of Mr. Rossetti :—

" In painting her I shrined her face
'Mid mystic trees, where light falls in
Hardly at all ; a covert place
Where you might think to find a din

*Of doubtful talk, and a live flame
Wandering, and many a shape whose name
Not itself knoweth, and old dew,
And your own footsteps meeting you,
And all things going as they came.*" (Page 128.)

Apart altogether from the meaninglessness, was ever writing so formally slovenly and laboriously limp? I have no time to pile example on example; I leave that task to the reader, who will not have to hunt far or long for some of the worst writing in our language. Of a piece are such expressions as, "O their glance is loftiest *dole!*" "in grove the *gracile* Spring trembles;" "her soft body, dainty thin;" "handsome Jenny mine;" "smouldering senses;" "the rustling covert of my soul;" "a little *spray* of tears;" "culminant changes;" "wasteful warmth of tears;" "the sunset's desolate disarray;" "watered my heart's drouth;" "the wind's wellaway;" "a shaken shadow intolerable;" "that swallow's *soar*" (a swallow, by the way, does not soar); "my eyes, wide open, *had the run* of some ten weeds to rest upon;" and a thousand others, as bad or worse, all to be found in Mr. Rossetti's small volume; besides the thousands upon thousands to be found in the works of his more fruitful brethren.

It would be wasting time to criticize details so worthless, save for the purpose of showing that insincerity in one respect argues insincerity in all, and that where we find a man choosing worthless subjects and affecting trashy models, we may rely on finding his treatment, down to the tiniest detail, frivolous, absurd, and reckless. The affectation of carefulness in composition is in proportion to the affectation of subtlety of theme; and the result is a lamentable amount, not of valuable poetic form, but of sound and fury, signify-

ing absolutely next to nothing, and as shapeless and undigested as chaos itself.

VII.

“Away with love verses, sugared in rhyme—the intrigues, amours of idlers,
Fitted for only banquets of the night, where dancers to late music slide;
The unhealthy pleasures, extravagant dissipations of the few.”

WALT WHITMAN.

Is this London? Is this the year 1872? That peep of blue up yonder resembles the sky, and these figures that pass seem men and women. What evil dream, then, what malignant influence is upon me? Weary of surveying the poetry of the past, and listening to the amatory wails of generations, I walk down the streets, and lo! again harlots stare from the shop-windows, and the great Alhambra posters cover the dead-walls. I go to the theatre which is crowded nightly, and I listen in absolute amaze to the bestialities of *Geneviève de Brabant*. I walk in the broad day, and a dozen hands offer me indecent prints. I step into a bookseller's shop, and behold! I am recommended to purchase a reprint of the plays and novels of Mrs. Aphra Behn. I buy a cheap republican newspaper, thinking that there, at least, I shall find some relief, if only in the wildest stump oratory, and I am saluted instead in these words:—

“FANNY HILL. Genuine edition, illustrated. Two volumes, 2s. 6d. each. Lovers' Festival, plates, 3s. 6d. Adventures of a Lady's Maid, 2s. 6d. Intrigues of a Ballet Girl, 2s. 6d. Aristotle, illustrated, 2s. French Transparent Cards, 1s. the set. Cartes de Visite from life, 1s. List two stamps. London: H. D——. 15, St. M—— R——d, C——ll.

"FANNY HILL, coloured plates, 2 vols. 4s.; Aristotle's Master-piece, plates, 2s. 6d.; Life of the celebrated Moll Flanders, 5s. 6d.; Mysteries of a Convent, 1s. List sent on receipt of two stamps. E. B——, 9, R——n S——t, B—— S——, E.

"THE BACHELOR'S SCARF PIN, containing secret photos of pretty women, 24 stamps; French Cards, 1s. the set; Life of a Ballet Girl, 2s. 6d.; Bang-up Reciter, 2s.; Maria Monk, 1s. 6d.; Fanny Hill, with plates, 3s. 6d. Lists two stamps. C. N——, 4, K——'s S—— Avenue, B——."

Step where I may, the snake Sensualism spits its venom upon me. The deeper I probe the public sore, the more terrible I find its nature. I ask my physician for his experience; he only shakes his head, and dares not utter all he knows. I consult the police; they give me such details of unapproachable crime as fill my soul with horror. Returning home, I meet a friend, who tells me that the Society for the Suppression of Vice has at last stirred itself, and that the Lord Chamberlain, moreover, has interdicted the last foul importation from France.* O for a scourge to whip these money-changers of Vice for ever out of the Temple!

Now, God forbid that I should charge any living English poet with desiring to encourage debauchery and to demoralise the public. I believe that both Mr. Swinburne and Mr. Rossetti are honest men, pure according to their lights, loving what is beautiful, conscientiously following what inspiration lies within them. They do not quite realise that they are merely supplementing the literature of

* An interdiction which, says the *Athenæum*, "is the most wanton violation of liberty, and the most unwarrantable interference with Art, that modern times have witnessed!" It is to be hoped, however, that the Lord Chamberlain will not be dispirited by the indignation of Sir Charles Dilke's journal, which, as the leading organ of the Fleshly School, is as peculiar in its notions of literary decency as Sir Charles himself in his notions of political propriety.

Holywell Street, and writing books well worthy of being sold under "sealed covers." Much of Mr. Swinburne's grossness has come of the mad aggressiveness of youth, fostered by reading the worst French poets. Nearly all Mr. Rossetti's effeminacy comes of eternal self-contemplation, of trashy models, of want of response to the needs and the duties of his time. What stuff is this they are putting forward, or suffering their coterie to put forward for them? It is time, they say, that the simple and natural delights of the Body should be sung as holy; it is unbearable, they echo, that purists should object to the record of sane pleasures of sense; it is just, they reiterate, that Passion should have its poetry and the Flesh its vindication.* As if the "simple and natural delights of the body" had not been occupying our poetry ever since the days of the "*Confessio Amantis*!" As if sane (and for that matter, insane) pleasures of sense had not been the stock-in-trade of nine-tenths of all our poets and poetasters, from Wyatt to Swinburne! As if Passion had been silent until this year of the Lord 1872, and as if, till the advent of a Rossetti, the world had entirely lost sight of the Flesh! The Flesh and the Body have been sung till the Muses are hoarse again. Two-thirds of our poetry is all Body; nine-tenths of our poets are all Flesh. One would think, from this outcry, that the amative faculty was a new organ discovered by some phrenological bard of the period, and never before traced as having any influence on the human race. One would fancy, from some of our modern criticisms, that the only English poets up to this period had been Milton, holy Mr. Herbert, and the author

* See, for example, "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," addressed by an English Lady to W. M. Rossetti (1870):

of the "Christian Year!" One would swear, to hear these Cupids of the new Fleshly Epoch, that English literature had been veritably getting blue-mouldy with too much virtue, and that the Spirit of Imagination had lived in a nunnery, fed on pulse and cold water, since Chaucer's time, instead of rioting in a lupanar, fed on hot meat and spiced wine, for hundreds upon hundreds of years!

Perhaps, if the truth were told, we have had a little too much of the Body. Perhaps, if we push the matter home, it is no more rational to rave of the "just delights of the flesh" than it would be to talk of the "glorious liberty" of "sweating" and the "sane celebration" of the right to "spit." Perhaps, after all, since so many centuries of Sexuality have done so little for poetry, it might be advantageous to give Spirituality a trial, and to see if *her* efforts to create a literature are equally unsuccessful.

In answer to all this, it may be retorted—in the easiest form of retort known to mankind—that *I* am a Philistine, that *I* would emasculate our poets altogether, and that *I* would substitute for passion the merest humanitarian and other "sentiment." Well, although *I* fear that *I* am a Puritan in a certain sense, *I* trust *I* am not a purist in the worst sense. My favourite ancient poet is the author of "Atys." *I* prefer Shakspeare to Milton, and *I* would not obliterate a line, however coarse, of Chaucer. *I* love Rabelais, and hold (with Coleridge) that he is deep and pure as the sea. *I* know no pleasanter reading for an idle hour than La Fontaine, no richer reading for a thoughtful hour than certain (by no means unimpeachable) novels of Balzac. *I* see the strangest erotic forces in the loves of Wilhelm Meister, but *I* admit their beauty and their worth.

I welcome Heine, and could listen to his mad laughter for a summer day. I love Byron better than Tupper, and of all Byron's books I best love "Don Juan." I reverence Hugo, and I see nothing in him that is shocking, save, perhaps, certain abominable eccentricities in "*L'Homme qui Rit*." I still beguile many an hour, when snug at anchor in some lovely Highland loch, with the inimitable, yet questionable, pictures of Parisian life left by Paul de Kock; and I know no sweeter poet in some respects than the egregious Alfred de Musset. To my thinking, there is no grander passage in literature than that tremendous scene between Ottilia and her paramour, in "*Pippa Passes*:" no one accuses the author of that, and of the "*Ring and the Book*," of neglecting love or overlooking the body; and yet I do daily homage to the genius of Robert Browning. I deem "*Vivien*" an essential pendant to that wonderful apotheosis of Masculine Chastity, which is the heart of that Arthurian epic on which the laureate has poured all his orient poetic wealth. I have praised Whitman, and hope to praise him over and over again. I know no fresher, finer work of this generation than certain novels by Mr. Charles Reade, who is not generally considered an ascetic author. In one word, I have no earthly objection to the Body and the Flesh in their rightful time and place, as part of great work and noble art; I do not see any great wickedness in the old-fashioned use of the gaudriole; and I am ready (as any sane man must be ready) to regard with kindness, and even sympathy, all work of a really good and honest author, even if it here and there, as I may think, exceeds the just limits of reserve, and becomes indecent, as sometimes happens, by sheer force of power. But Flesh,

merely as the Flesh, is too much for me. I find it foolish, querulous, affected, uninteresting. I do not admire its absurd manner of considering itself the Soul. I grudge it none of its just delights, even in the way of "lipping" and "munching;" only, let it enjoy them without making such a coil about them. The world never tires of *real* passion; it will listen to Burns's love-songs for ever; but fleshliness is not necessarily passion, and may abound in natures utterly passionless. There are many other functions of the flesh which it is not the custom to perform in public, but which are quite as interesting to third parties as what Shakspeare calls "the deed." Really, if we set no limit to the flesh, it is certain to disgrace us in the long-run. It has already created a literature in Holywell Street. Shall we suffer it to found a poetry in St. John's Wood?

English Verse-poetry has been, up to the present moment, almost exclusively the property of querulous persons, engaged in contemplating their own images—either in an ordinary looking-glass or in the eyes of a fantastic female. We have had a certain number of great poets who have chosen to use rhymed and metrical speech—our very greatest, indeed, have spoken in this way; but many of our noblest—such as Bacon, Bunyan, and Thomas Carlyle—have chosen to use simple prose as their means of expression; and the last of these prose-poets has very recently, in a remarkable letter to a gentleman who had sent him some verses, protested energetically that he would infinitely have preferred a good bit of solid simple prose—that, in fact, Verse is an artificial sort of thing, by no means to be encouraged at this time of day. Rough and sweeping as this condemnation of Verse appears to be, there is a certain

homely truth about it. It has been the unfortunate habit of most of our poets, and especially of those we have been specially criticizing in this article, to use Verse as the vehicle of whatever thoughts are too thin or too fantastic, too much of the sweet-pea order of products, to stand without the aid of rhythmical props. Ideas too bald for prose, too trivial to stand unadorned, appear unique enough when subjected to the euphuistic process, and robed in all the wordy glitter of rhyme. If any English author, in good round prose, were to call Death "a seizure of inalign vicissitude," and compare Life to a Lady with whom he ranged the world till he found a fit "bower" for nuptial performances; or if any author were to narrate for us, still in good round prose, such a savoury narrative as that of "The Leper" in Mr. Swinburne's poems, surely he would very soon receive his just deserts. Yet simply because such ideas and such stories are told in lines cut into certain lengths and jingling at the ends; solely because, by one-half the public, verse is *recognised* as an unnatural and altogether artificial form of speech, the trash of windy men is christened Art, and writers without one ray of imagination are accredited with the genius of song. It thus happens that, in the opinion of many people, the word "poet" is synonymous with "madman;" and we are told again and again not to judge such and such compositions too severely, as "they are *only* poetry." It thus happens that we every day behold the melancholy spectacle of inferior men giving themselves the airs of great men merely because they can write meretricious verses. Why, I will venture to say that there is more real genius and more true literary brilliance in any one of Mr. G. A. Sala's "Dutch Pictures" than in all

the fleshly products heaped together, and yet Mr. Sala only calls himself a "special correspondent," and is far, very far, from being a "poetical" person.

If poetry—Verse-poetry—is to be anything else than an impediment to progress, if it is to become something better than the resource of feeble talents unable to stand without artificial aid, it must be more and more approximated to the natural language of men; it must be weeded of the hideous phraseology of the schools, and sown with the fresh and beautiful idioms of daily speech; and it must deal with great issues in which all men are interested, not with the "damnable face-making" of Narcissus in a mirror. Elsewhere, notably in Germany, such experiments are encouraged as tend to broaden and strengthen the resources of poetry, and to multiply its facilities; but here in England every fresh experiment in language is ridiculed and disliked, unless it be a retrograde experiment, trebling the limitations and quadrupling the affectations of ancient rhyme. Mr. Swinburne's eternal jingle, and Mr. Rosseti's affected harpsichord-melody, are admired, though they throw us back hundreds of years; but not one grain of sympathy has been shown for the metrical importations, often exquisite, of Mr. Matthew Arnold, the never-ending experiments of the late Arthur Hugh Clough (a giant who died young, and alas! has left no one who fills his place in the van of thought), and the wonderful poetic prose, or prose-poetry, of Walt Whitman. The public appears to be willing that verse-poetry should remain the property of men of talent, anxious to increase its already almost insuperable limitations; and it thus happens that our men and women of genius—such as Carlyle, Hugo, Reade, Emerson, Haw-

thorne—have written some of the best poetry of this generation in simple prose.*

The name of Poet was once a title of honour ; it bids fair soon to be a title of ridicule. The form of Verse was at one period held to be the noblest possible kind of human utterance ; but that form, remaining as it does in the swaddling-clothes of infant speech, will possibly be more or less abandoned as time rolls on by the thinkers and dreamers of the world. The word poetry may one day be identical with absurdity ; and no one will jingle the cap and bells of rhyme but a fool. Is there no hope ? Yes, a gleam. All the blundering and all the time-wasting in our literature have been caused by eternal posturing before the mirror. Each feeble talent has been so fascinated by his own image as to dwindle into an intellectual daisy or pine into a poetical primrose. Our literary shame has sprung from want of knowledge of how the world wags, of how men and women live and love, of what mighty forces are sweeping across the earth their angels' wings. Let the Sultan of Literature, if there be such a person (and if not, we might do worse than elect the functionary), issue forth an edict ordering the destruction of all *looking-glasses*, and the immediate silencing of all persons who introduce the subject of *their own emotions*. This would at least have the effect of driving our poets, if they *must* see themselves, to see themselves in flowing Rivers or the mighty Sea, and to wail aloud, if wail they must, to the four Winds of Heaven ; and thus they might come in time to find how little account they themselves are

* "The French Revolution," "Les Misérables," "The Cloister and the Hearth," Emerson's first set of Essays, and "The Scarlet Letter"—all these works are "poems" in the noblest sense.

in the great scheme of nature, and how much is to be done on earth besides making night and day hideous with sensual shadows and dreams. Yet, after all, I fear there would be evasion even then; for ten to one you would find some Simple Simon of the amatory type, driven to despair by the universal destruction of looking-glasses, filling the family washing-tub with water from the pump, and pining away into a shadow for love of his own image hovering therein !

NOTES.

Page 45.—MR. ROSSETTI'S "JENNY."

SINCE the above was written, the *Quarterly Review* has spoken in very similar language to my own; and I agree with its strictures in every passage, save those which are levelled against Mr. Tennyson. The poet laureate is open to judgment, and is strong enough to bear it; but I hold it to be in all respects lamentable that he has been censured in the same breath as the men who owe to him what little in their writings is good and worthy. The *Review* speaks thus of "Jenny:"—

"We purpose to close our remarks on Mr. Rossetti's verse with some reflections on a poem which, we think, reveals characteristically the incapacity of the literary poet to deal with contemporary themes in an effective and straightforward manner. 'Jenny' is a poem on the subject of unfortunate women. A man is supposed to have followed a girl of this description to her house, where she falls asleep with her head on his knee, while he moralises on her condition. The majority of poets have, as we think wisely, avoided subjects of this sort. But assuming that success might justify its treatment, one of the first elements of success is that a piece should be brief and forcible. 'Jenny' is nearly four hundred lines long. The metre at the opening reminds us of one which Mr. Browning uses with characteristic force, but which in Mr. Rossetti's hands soon degenerates into feeble octosyllabic verse. The thought throughout is pretentious but commonplace. The moralist, beginning with something like a rhapsody on the appearance of the girl as she lies asleep, wonders what she is thinking about; he then reflects that her sleep exactly resembles the sleep of a pure woman; her face he feels might serve a painter as the model of a Madonna. We are thus imperceptibly edged on into the author's favourite regions of abstraction :—

'Yet, Jenny, looking long at you
The woman almost fades from view.

A cipher of man's changeless sum
Of lust past, present, and to come
Is left. A riddle that one shrinks
To challenge from the scornful sphinx.'

Exactly. So this profound philosopher, whose somewhat particular reflections on the charms of the sleeper have brought him at last face to face with the mystery of evil, coolly remarks :—

'Come, come, what good in thoughts like this?'

packs some gold in the girl's hair, and takes his leave. What good indeed? But why in that case, and if Mr. Rossetti had no power to deal otherwise with so painful a theme, could he not have spared us an useless display of affected sentiment and impotent philosophy?

"The style of the poem is as bad as the matter. Descriptions repulsively realistic are mixed up with imagery like that in Solomon's Song; the most familiar objects are described by the most unusual phrases; a London schoolboy, for instance, being called 'a wise unchildish elf,' while the similes are painfully far-fetched. The heart of the woman is said to be—

'Like a rose shut in a book
In which pure women may not look,
For its base pages claim control
To crush the flower within the soul;
Where through each dead rose-leaf that clings,
Pale as transparent Psyche wings,
To the vile text, are traced such things
As might make lady's cheeks indeed
More than a living rose to read;
So nought save foolish foulness may
Watch with hard eyes the sure decay;
And so the life-blood of this rose,
Puddled with shameful knowledge, flows
Through leaves no chaste hand may unclose.'

Affectation and obscurity make the application of this difficult enough. It will not, however, escape notice that the simile is radically false, for whereas the point is that the woman's heart is alive in the midst of corruption, the rose in the book, to which the heart is compared, is dried and dead."

Page 71.—COTERIE GLORY.

That the system by which the school of verse-writers under criticism has made itself notorious is at last defeating itself, is evident from a recent article, entitled "Coterie Glory," in the *Saturday Review*—a journal which, I believe, has been more than once made use of by the friends of the gentlemen in question. The author of "Coterie Glory," in a number of decisive and perfectly well-tempered remarks, surveys the whole question, and on coming to the Fleshly School, openly admits, as if on certain knowledge, that the personal friends of the poets *write all the reviews*. This also, observes the reviewer, was the case with the once famous "Della Cruscan School," surviving now only, if it can be called survival, in Gifford's ponderous but effective satire.

"A little circle of mutual admiration contrived, by ingenious devices of criticism, to create in the outer world what for awhile looked like real fame. Afterwards we had the 'mystic' school, to which the authors of *Festus*, the *Roman*, and other kindred spirits, chronicled in full by Mr. Gilfillan, belonged."

After glancing at the kind of poetry produced by the Fleshly School, the writer continues:—

"It is clear that poetry of this order can appeal only to a limited class. It claims to be tried by a special jury of cultivated persons. This, however, is a very dangerous position for the jurors. They who have been at the pains of mastering such special qualifications, by a natural law, soon regard them as the only canons of taste; nothing which does not conform to them has the true ring. Having conquered caviare, they find all that pleases 'the general' tasteless. Philistinism itself is not more adverse to discrimination than this Pharisaic isolation. Once in this frame of mind, men rapidly unlearn judging in favour of believing; they feel that they do right to be partisans in such a cause; they taste the keen delights of initiation into a creed hidden from the vulgar; they reject all moderating or hostile criticism from the laity without, as proceeding from men not specially qualified; they tend to pass from faith into fanaticism. Hence also, the general attitude of criticism being of the tolerant or sceptical order already described, *the believers at first write all the reviews, and man every bastion of what Goethe somewhere calls the 'critical Zion.'* That it has been so in the case of our later 'Pre-Raphaelites' is denied nowhere. Crowns thus decreed may certainly and uninvincibly be described as 'Coterie Glory.'

"A curious sign, lastly, confirms the position which we have here advanced. It is the very essence of faith to be uncritical; to regard

the day for criticism as passed. It seems to be simply impossible for the artist and his circle of believers to regard a criticism on his art as anything but a criticism on himself. Many of our readers who may have watched with amusement the recent squabble between Mr. Buchanan and Mr. Rossetti will recognise a proof of our statement. Into the merits of the case we decline to go; we do not ask whether Mr. Buchanan's attacks were well founded, whether he was entitled to use a pseudonym, or whether his article exhibited that good taste which is nowhere more called for than when a question of taste is the matter in discussion. Our point is, that *the 'Fleshly School of Poetry' did, in the main, attempt to try Mr. Rossetti's verses, and not Mr. Rossetti himself as distinct from Mr. Rossetti the author, by critical rules. That the poet, rudely roused from the security of fame generated by the too friendly voices of disciples, should have regarded his reviewer as actuated by base personal motives was natural. But it is characteristic that the followers should be under the same impression.* One of the latest of them has just published a further reply to Mr. Buchanan, which rivals what we had too fondly believed was the tone of discussion and the form of argument peculiar to the 'odium theologicum.' Mr. Forman, the writer, is so hurried away by zeal for his faith that, though known only as a critic, he prefixes to his paper a cruel (and in this case, we are sure, an inapplicable) motto, describing critics as the offspring of jealousy and literary failure. To re-state Mr. Buchanan's arguments in his own vocabulary appears to Mr. Forman, and we do not doubt appears in perfect good faith, equivalent to their refutation. To quote in full Mr. Rossetti's sonnet on 'Nuptial Sleep' is proof of its maiden modesty of phrase so absolute that a man must be, we cannot venture to say what, who denies it. The gist of the whole is, that every criticism made against the book is, in fact levelled against the author. What reads like a remark that a rhyme is weak is really an ungentlemanly libel on the rhymester. It is obvious that this is the canon, not of criticism, but of fanatic faith; nay, that it implicitly treats criticism as sin. For what judgment is possible if critical blame is treated as personal malignity, and if to ascribe affectation to a song is the same as to insult an artist? Yet such is the impassioned spirit of coterie that this appears to be the underlying, though no doubt the wholly unconscious, postulate of the poet and his followers. We altogether disclaim such an inference; and give notice that when we say that Mr. Buchanan's attack is less damaging than Mr. Forman's defence, we do not thereby imply that Mr. Forman has a base or wilful intention to injure Mr. Rossetti. He is only what some writer calls 'that worst of enemies, your worshipper.'"—*Saturday Review*, Feb. 24th, 1872.

These remarks are worth attention, firstly, for their inherent truth; and secondly, because they come from a quarter which can certainly not be accused of friendliness to myself.

Page 87.—WALT WHITMAN.

There is at the present moment living in America a great ideal prophet, who is imagined by many men on both sides of the Atlantic to be one of the sanest and grandest figures to be found in literature, and whose books, it is believed, though now despised, may one day be esteemed as an especial glory of this generation. It is no part of my present business to eulogize Walt Whitman, or to protest against the popular misconceptions concerning him; but it just happens that I have been asked, honestly enough, how it is that I despise so much the *Fleshly School of Poetry* in England and admire so much the poetry which is widely considered unclean and animal in America? It is urged, moreover, that Mr. Rossetti and Mr. Swinburne merely repeat the immodesties of the author of "*Leaves of Grass*," and that to be quite consistent I must condemn all alike. Very true, if Whitman be a poet of *this* complexion, if his poetry be shot through and through with animalism as certain stuffs are shot through and through with silk. But it requires no great subtlety of sight to perceive the difference between these men. To begin with, there are Singers, imitative and shallow; while that other is a Bard, outrageously original and creative in the form and substance of his so-called verse. In the next place, Whitman is in the highest sense a spiritual person; every word he utters is symbolic: he is a colossal mystic; but in ~~all~~ his great work, the theme of which is spiritual purity and health, there are not more than fifty lines of a thoroughly indecent kind, and these fifty lines are embedded in passages in the noblest sense antagonistic to mere lust and indulgence. No one regrets the writing and printing of these fifty lines more than I do. They are totally unnecessary, and silly in the highest degree—silly as some of Shakspeare's dirt is silly—silly in the way of Aristophanes, Rabelais, Victor Hugo—from sheer excess of aggressive life. Fifty lines, observe, out of a book nearly as big as the Bible; lines utterly stupid, and unpardonable in themselves; but to be forgiven, doubtless, for the sake of the spotless love and chastity surrounding them. It is Whitman's business to chronicle *all* human sensations in the person of the "*Cosmical Man*," or typical Ego; and when he comes to the sexual instincts, he tries to blend emotion and physiology together, to the utter destruction of all natural

effect. Judging from the internal evidence of these passages, I should say that Whitman was by no means a man of strong animal passions. There is a frightful violence in his expressions, which an epicure in lust would have avoided. This part of his book, I guess, cost him a good deal of trouble; it is not written *con amore*; and, apart from its double or mystic meaning, is just what an old philosopher might write if he were trying to represent passion by the dim light of memory. At all events, here Whitman is talking nonsense, as is the way of all wise men at some unfortunate moment or other. Elsewhere, he is perhaps the most mystic and least fleshly person that ever wrote.

It is in a thousand ways unfortunate for Walt Whitman that he has been introduced to the English public by Mr. William Rossetti, and been loudly praised by Mr. Swinburne. Doubtless these gentlemen admire the American poet for all that is best in him; but the British public, having heard that Whitman is immoral, and having already a dim guess that Messrs. Swinburne and Rossetti are not over-refined, has come to the conclusion that his nastiness alone has been his recommendation. All this despite the fact that Mr. William Rossetti has expurgated the fifty lines or so in his edition.

I should like to disclaim, in this place, all sympathy with Whitman's pantheistic ideas. My admiration for this writer is based on the wealth of his knowledge, the vast roll of his conceptions (however monstrous), the nobility of his *practical* teaching, and (most of all perhaps) on his close approach to a solution of the true relationship between prose cadence and metrical verse. Whitman's style, extraordinary as it is, is his greatest contribution to knowledge. It is not impossible to foresee a day when Coleridge's feeling of the "wonderfulness of prose" may become universal, and our poetry (still swathe-bound in the form of early infant speech, or rhyme) may expand into a literature blending together all that is musical in verse, and all that is facile and powerful in ordinary language. I do not think Whitman has *solved* the difficulty, but he sometimes comes tremendously close upon the arcana of perfect speech.

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